

# *i magazine*

*a Literary Arts Journal*



*Spring 2005*



# i magazine

a literary arts journal  
spring 2005

i magazine  
is a student publication of  
Mount Wachusett Community College  
Gardner, Massachusetts

# i magazine

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## A NOTE ON THE PHOTOGRAPHS

All student images are digital images (students of BCT115, Digital Photography) except for Chris Aho's. Chris is a student of BCT226 Advanced Photography. Both of his images originated as a color slide. The slide was put into the enlarger and a reversed, negative-like image was created on standard photographic paper. In "Solarization," the print was exposed to additional light during the developing process, which caused the white areas of the print to turn silver gray. In "Handdev," Chris dipped his hand in the developer instead of the print. He then placed his hand on the print and held it there for a little over a minute. The result is that the print only developed where his developer-coated hand touched.

*Professor Bob Mayer*

*Sometimes*

Life has no plot. It is a story made up of a million different unrelated moments. It has no beginning and no end, just a massive and overly drawn-out middle.

On any given day, I am sitting in a room surrounded by the people that I know. On any given day, they are living one line of one page of this story. There is no climax. There is no reason. There is no purpose. Life is to be lived and not thought. We are what makes life what it is. We are what inspires dripping colors on a canvas. We are the reason for poetic words on a piece of a paper. We are words to a song and music for dancing. These are the things that make us what we are.

And eventually, the story will write itself.

Sometimes there is no reason to have a reason.

I know a girl who has a lot of boyfriends. I guess that there's nothing really wrong with that, except that none of her boyfriends know about her other boyfriends. Sometimes they find out about each other and leave her, except for the ones that she's fucking because those ones never really cared all that much about her anyway. She is just sex to them. She means nothing. She is a mindless machine. She is an empty body. She is dispensable matter. She still confuses the act of sex with the concept of love. They are not two separate entities. There is no line in between then. I think that in the back of her head she knows that just because they fuck her, it doesn't mean they love her. Their words are empty, so their actions are all that's left to fill her hollow frame. I think she tries to keep the truth as far back in her mind as she can, because all she's really ever wanted was for someone to love her.

She wants the kind of love that you can feel inside, a sweet nauseous stomach and a heart pounding violently against is white bone cage.

I wonder why she sleeps with boys that don't respect her. I ask her why she stays with boys that will never have the ability to love her. Her answer is always the same: if she

hasn't found love yet, then what's it matter who she's fucking while she looks?

Sometimes sex is just sex, and nothing more.

I used to have a friend that was addicted to drugs. She isn't really my friend anymore because drugs turned her into a different person after awhile. They have the ability to take over everything that used to make you who you were, and they turn you into something completely different. You're a walking, talking, barely breathing version of what you used to be. It's like someone took a girl I used to know and hollowed out her body so that they could fill it up with powders and pills. It wasn't always this bad. At first, she just wanted to get high with her friends on the weekend. Eventually, it turned into getting high by herself on the weekend. Soon enough it wasn't even about wanting to get high, but it was more about needing to get high. It wasn't for the sake of fun or enlightenment anymore. It wasn't desire or enjoyment. It was imperative. It was vital. It was necessity.

Everyone has a reason for doing drugs, and hers was so that she wouldn't feel. Everyone goes through a point in their life when things get to be too much to handle, and her escape was to send poison through her body at rapid speeds so that maybe, even if just for a few hours, she'd be numb.

It's weird how some people escape into drugs and eventually find their way out. It's weird how some people get lost and never come back.

Sometimes we just need to allow ourselves to feel whatever it is we feel.

I used to know a boy, and I was in love with him. He loved me too, but he was too scared to say it. The four-letter word would just shake in his mouth and get caught inside of his throat. It hid behind his teeth, showing just enough for me to see without him actually having to speak. Love is one of those things that you just see in someone's eyes. It's the way the light reflects of them. It's something that radiates outwards for everyone else to see. He was the kind of boy that was perfect even though he wasn't. He could be thoughtless, and aggravating, and he was so confusing all of the time; but god, did I love him. Eventually, things ended between us. I think that it was mostly my fault. I was a mess that he didn't want to clean up. I was more than he wanted

and less than he needed.

Sometimes hearts break.

I have this picture of the two of us that I look at sometimes when I miss him. I have this awkward closed mouth smile next to his white picket fence of teeth. Our crimson colored lips next to our two perfectly hidden sets of love-struck hips. I'm trying to match the green in my eyes with the green in his. Sometimes I want to forget the paleness of his skin, and the sweetness of his smile. And those eyes, those beautiful fucking eyes. I just want to forget them. Sometimes life is good memories, and sometimes life is memories that we want to erase.

I've got this all saved on a four by six inch piece of glossy paper.

But sometimes, I just want to forget.

I have a friend who takes two pills a day to smile. In her mind, happiness is an unreachable goal without their assistance. Her therapist says that she's depressed, and that the only way she can feel better is by swallowing down a doctor-prescribed dosage of Prozac, or Zoloft, or some other mind-numbing, happiness-inducing drug.

Happiness is no longer sunshine and fun-filled days. Happiness is a 400-milligram dose taken 3 times a day with a glass of water. I wish I knew when we all started needing so much to survive. We need pills to be happy. We need sex to feel loved. We need drugs to feel numb. We need money to feel successful. We need to get good grades and get accepted by the right college and land ourselves in the perfect job. We need to drive that luxury SUV back to our beautiful house with a two-car garage to see our perfect husband or wife to feel like our lives have actually meant anything. There's a pill to smile, there's a pill to fuck, there's a pill to make you prettier, a pill to lose weight, a pill to calm you down, a pill to breathe, a pill to live. We need all of this or else we feel like our worlds will seemingly fall apart. We're becoming your dishwashers, your televisions, your radios, and your computers. We are appliances that need to be plugged in. We are no longer want or desire. We are necessity. We are dependent on dependency.

Isn't that life, though?

Sometimes life is needy.

I know a lot of people that think they are in love. Sometimes it's the perfect kind of love that is romance and fireworks and summer nights. Sometimes it's the destructive kind of love that hurts more than it heals. Regardless of what kind of love it is, love is one of those things that once you find it; you should never let it go. You should hold on tight until your knuckles are white and fingers bleed.

Love isn't always easy. Love is wet cheeks and screaming fights as often as it is romantic dinners and warm embraces. You can't pick who you fall in love with. Sometimes things fall together like a perfectly placed puzzle, all the pieces in their exact places, and sometimes things fall apart and the pieces never fit. But no matter what kind of love it is, you just keep on going with it, because love is always worth it. It's worth everything to have those two second moments that cause "I love you" to drip out of our mouths and make messes on our floor.

Sometimes, love is all you really need.

I know girls that don't eat so that boys will think they're pretty. They starve themselves down to a size 3 and they think that this defines beauty. Magazine pages left out the fact that beauty is every pound of your overweight body. Beauty is your dirty hair and your poor complexion.

I know boys that love girls. I know girls that love boys. I know boys that are in love with other boys. I know girls that are in love with other girls. The only rule in love is that there are no rules. Love isn't male or female. Love isn't black or white.

I know boys that hit girls because that's what they've seen their fathers do. I know parents that hit their kids because they think it's discipline. I know people that hit other people because they think that bad tempers and poor morals give them a right to. Anger will eat you up and swallow you whole. Anger will turn pink faces to green.

I know girls that lie. I know boys that cheat. Deception is a mystery. The truth is so much easier, but we hide it under our well thought out excuses. We cover our tracks and we erase our files. We lie. We cheat. We are vain. We are violent. These are the things that make us everything we are. We are the cracking pavement under our feet. We are the raining sky above our heads.

I know a lot of messy people, including myself. I don't

mean we are messy just in the sense of our organizational skills, but I mean that we are messy in the sense of living. We don't know how to live and we don't know to love, but we do it anyway. We are perfectly painted rooms with our contents thrown across the floor. We are shaken-up, folded-down, and put-away.

We're either going down the downward spiral, or we're making our way back up it. Once you hit the bottom, you have nowhere else to go but up. The drug addicts will either rehabilitate or die. The pill poppers will either find happiness, or reduce themselves to mindless drones. The love-starved will either keep searching, or keep fucking. The brokenhearted will either heal, or hide. The faithless will either find hope, or crumble. We let things fester until some climax leaves us with no other choice. We'll ride down the spiral until there's nowhere else to go. We starve for as long as we can and then right as our stomachs are about to swallow themselves, we either eat or we die. We run for as long as we can and then right as our legs are about to turn to jelly, we either stop or we collapse.

I am starving and I am running.

I'm just like you, and you're just like me. We are all alive and we are all lost inside the story. None of us are right or wrong; not the broken-hearted, not the drug users, not the lonely souls. We are the erasers taken to the pencil-drawn lines that lie in between right and wrong. We are clear images and blurry motions. We are solid faces, wet cheeks, and broken hearts. We are life and we are death. We are the redrawn line that separates.

Sometimes that's just how the story goes. Sometimes it's good, and sometimes its bad. There's no beginning, there's no conflict, there's no resolution, and there is no end; just people.

Just moments.

Sometimes life doesn't have a plot.

## *Far From Lincoln*

Rusty picked up the woman's tab. He thought it was what any gentleman would do. But Rusty was no gentleman and this act of courtesy was far from chivalrous. Regardless, for all Rusty knew, the woman sitting next to him pitied his unfortunate soul and was pleased with his unselfish gesture. Rusty paid the bartender and looked over his shoulder one last time at Jackson. With the slightest bit of luck, the woman would follow Rusty out of the bar and would soon be in his bedroom undressing.

Jackson and Rusty had started drinking early. Rusty left work just in time to arrive for happy hour where he found Jackson already at the bar, scratching lottery tickets in between cleaning the old wooden tables and bar stools. When Rusty got to Longfellow's, Jackson quit cleaning and told his dad he was off the clock for the night. The two sat down and had a few beers before starting a game of darts. They played four games, three of which Rusty lost, before the regular Thursday night crowd started pouring in. Rusty ordered two burgers for himself and Jackson and they managed to grab seats at the corner table where Al O'Malley and Larry Shea were sitting. The men were thrilled to see Rusty since he hadn't been around for a few weeks and Larry immediately ordered a round of drinks for the group. While they ate, Al O'Malley challenged the guys in a game of AUTO, or Al's Useless Trivia Operation. This was a popular game at Longfellow's, and Al was always more than pleased to stump the younger men of the bar with questions only he would ever know the answers to. Rusty shocked Al in one round, however, by correctly naming the 21 states ending in the letter "a." The men finished their meals and Jackson's dad turned the game on.

The crowd was mixed tonight. There were, as usual, the regulars, which consisted mostly of Jackson's family and close friends, like Rusty. Then, there were some "seldomers" as Jackson's dad called them. These guys came around every once in a while when the other bars were too packed on game nights. They were well liked, but didn't enjoy the company at Longfellow's as much as the regulars.

Then, there were some real young guys. Rusty figured they were probably from the college in the next town over, and he questioned to himself whether they should even be in the bar at all. Finally, the oddest group tonight was the six women who came in just around halftime. They were dressed nicely and Rusty had never seen them before. He guessed they were from out of town and were told to come here by a local when asked where the nearest lounge was. If the women were surprised to find nothing of a lounge in Longfellow's, they didn't show their disappointment. They just took a table and ordered cocktails.

After the game, Rusty and Jackson continued their darts tournament. Rusty was three games behind and Jackson was as cocky as ever. Rusty liked playing with Jackson. Even though he wasn't the best darts player, he loved the victory when it would come because it shut Jackson's big mouth right up and Rusty would just laugh knowing how upset Jackson really was for losing.

They were in the middle of a game when Jackson made the bet. He was looking at the women all night, and Rusty had to admit he couldn't help his eyes from wandering over towards them either.

"Hey, Rusty, how 'bout making a bet you got a chance at winning tonight...unless of course you wanna lose all your money on this game?"

Rusty ignored Jackson's chatter and concentrated hard on the bull's eye. Jackson was getting loud and proud again and Rusty wanted to win this game.

"Rusty, how 'bout it. Look at the ladies over there. I can tell they're dying to meet Mr. Rusty Danvers himself."

Rusty missed the target and turned to Jackson. "Okay, Jackson, you're on. I know I could finish you off with two more games but we'll just speed things along and I'll take your new bet and run with it."

Jackson asked Rusty if he had ever seen the women. Rusty said he hadn't and asked Jackson the same. Jackson replied that he knew nothing of the women but wished he had. After Jackson threw for his last turn, he picked one woman out of the group and decided she was right for the bet.

"Okay, Junior, she's the one in black. The blonde. Good luck with it and I'll take my money tonight so I can take Jessie out tomorrow night."

She was thin and busty and was wearing a short black skirt with a black top underneath a button-up sweater. Jackson called her "Suzie" because he said she reminded him of a vixen he'd seen in a movie once. Jackson told Rusty she

was the prettiest out of the group and he bet him fifty dollars that he couldn't pick her up. Rusty thought Jackson's proposal was ridiculous, but the men shook hands and Rusty walked over to the table where the women were sitting.

Rusty introduced himself to the women and asked them if they were from out of town. A larger woman with red hair and glasses replied that they were indeed from out of town and they were here on a visit for their book club. Apparently, a well-known author from Rusty's very own hometown wrote such a spectacular book that the women drove thirteen hours just to visit the source of inspiration. Rusty was impressed to learn this but didn't happen to catch the name of the book as he was sure he would never read it. The women introduced themselves one by one to Rusty and by the time he made it to Suzie, he could hear Jackson's laugh from across the room. He ignored it and shook hands with Diane. He then made a mental note and repeated the name, Diane, to himself about twenty times. It would have been embarrassing and very much to his disadvantage for the sake of the bet if he happened to accidentally call Diane "Suzie."

Rusty had been sitting with the women for about an hour by the time Jackson finally came over. Rusty introduced Jackson to the women and told them that his father owned the bar. The women seemed somewhat impressed with Jackson and the redhead along with another brunette pulled a chair between them for him to sit in. Rusty felt slightly more comfortable with Jackson now at the table, but he still remained quiet and just listened to the women chat about his town and what a great place it was.

Rusty was content with listening to the women talk, but he decided he had to make a move soon before Diane forgot he was around. He got up, walked over to her and asked if she would like another martini. She seemed surprised at the offer but, in any case, got up and followed Rusty to the bar. Rusty pulled a stool up next to one that was already free and asked Jackson's dad for a beer and another martini for Diane.

"So, Diane, how do you like Longfellow's?" Rusty's voice cracked as he asked this, but he coughed quickly to cover it up.

"It seems like a nice place...reminds me of a little bar back home I go to with my grandfather sometimes." Diane smiled and sipped her martini.

"Yeah, it's not the most fancy place around, but I'm always at home here and most of these guys are like brothers to me." There was an awkward pause and Rusty panicked for

a moment and thought he must have looked like a fool to Diane. She interrupted his worries and asked him if he lived in Lincoln.

"Yeah, I've lived here all my life. I've never gone far and don't plan on leaving anytime soon. What about you, where are you from?"

"Millersburg...it's about 840 miles north of here. You've probably never heard of it. Small town. The people are nice, but news flies and you never know when you'll be the topic of Sunday morning breakfast."

Rusty and Diane talked at the bar for the rest of the night while Jackson entertained the other five women with stories about fishing. The women seemed to adore Jackson and his humor, and Rusty occasionally asked Diane if she would rather join her friends. Diane told Rusty that she liked his stories. They were true and touching, and she said she had never heard anything like them before.

Diane told Rusty she had been married once. She loved her husband and they were happy for a time. Then, he began to hit her and Diane left him without asking for anything. She moved in with her mother and started a new career. Diane told Rusty how she became a teacher and then she told him about her favorite students and how school would be starting again in just two weeks. Rusty told Diane about his mother and sisters. He told her how he woke up one morning and his mother was gone. Then, he quit school and got a job on the boat so he could buy his sisters Christmas presents. He also told her how his sisters went away to Virginia last summer to be with their father. Rusty never knew his father and Diane never knew hers.

Jackson's dad announced last call to everyone and Rusty told Diane to order herself another martini before the bar closed. He then excused himself to go to the bathroom and walked by Jackson at the women's table. He whispered to Jackson to let the women know that Rusty was going to show Diane his boat and they could expect her back at the hotel later on. Rusty returned from the bathroom and paid the tab.

The next morning, Rusty woke up with a headache. He opened his eyes and lay in bed for a minute before rolling over. Finally, he got up and realized that Diane was gone. He went to the bathroom, but she wasn't there. Then, he walked downstairs to the kitchen expecting to see her standing at the stove, cooking him breakfast. She wasn't in the kitchen so he went outside, but she wasn't there either. Rusty walked back inside and figured that Diane and the other women probably had to leave early to catch the bus

back. She must have told him this last night, but Rusty's head hurt too much to think hard about it. He sat down at the table and poured himself some coffee. Then, he took a few aspirin and went into the bathroom to start the shower.

Rusty walked back outside and around the house to the dock. When he didn't see his boat, he stopped and looked around. It was only Friday and there was no chance Jackson was out this early. Rusty walked to the water and looked out into the distance. It was a clear day and he could see some sailboats nearby. There were a few other boats, too, but he didn't recognize his anywhere. He headed back inside to call Jackson but noticed a piece of paper tied to the dock. Rusty untied the note and unfolded it.

*Rusty,  
Sorry about your boat. It couldn't have been worth  
more than \$50 anyways and it will get much more  
use far from Lincoln. If you ever do decide to leave,  
you will know where to find your boat.  
Love, Suzie*

Rusty laughed and tossed the note into the water. He went back inside and called Jackson. There was no answer, but Rusty left a message saying he needed the \$50 to buy a new boat.

*asleep in the leaves*

i wish he'd been there,  
although i'm not sure why  
he would have just made me nervous  
but at the same time i like the  
thought of bragging to people  
i used to know about how i have  
developed some sort of  
personality, some sort of life,  
how i have friends now,  
how i've come so far

(when really, i'm not so far from there  
as i'd like to think)

what is it about this season  
that sends me back there every year,  
without fail turns me cold and harsh and  
awkward, turns curves to angles and  
creates isolated golden rays stretched  
across empty desks

(i don't want them to see  
me this way, i don't want them to know  
how much of that ache i've carried  
with me all these years)

i huddle over powdered apple cider,  
warm but thin and bitter  
in my mind i'm turning over memories  
disguised as roses,  
or roses disguised as memories  
velvet, deep red against my pale autumn skin  
but full of hidden thorns that stick  
in my fingertips when i'm not looking

(i saw him the other night,  
he gave me a long, close hug,  
we talked in the cool air outside,  
he filled the void left four years ago)

then i woke up

i haven't completely woken up yet.

## *Leaping*

Some people say that things happen for a reason, others say that it's all chance. I never knew whom to believe. I'm still not sure. Perhaps they are all right; perhaps they are all wrong.

I was around six, lying in the big field that was my back yard. There was a road in front of the house, other than that beyond the field, there were only trees. White puffy clouds were hanging in the crystal blue sky above me. I was looking for shapes. Once I had seen a whale's tail. I wanted to see something just as wonderful that day. But there were no tails, no ice cream cones, no cats, there was nothing. Nothing with one exception. As I was beginning to give up hope one rather peculiar shaped cloud drifted over my field of view. I looked at it as long as I could. It was a face. An older man's face and he had a beard. A long beard, of the sort you would think to find on someone pretending to be Santa, but it wasn't Santa. It was God.

Now, don't start thinking that I have lost my mind, I was only 6 at the time. I believed with all of my heart that I was looking at God. I saw Him smiling down at me. I began talking to Him. I told him everything I thought, and his face didn't fade as most clouds do, it just kept smiling. The cloud moved farther and farther to the right. I asked it not to go. It didn't stop. It just kept moving, faster and faster away. The smile never fading from His face. Was He laughing at me? Why was he leaving? *COME BACK!*  
*PLEASE DON'T GO I'LL DO ANYTHING!*

Then he was gone.

After that day, my belief in God began to dwindle.

"Do you believe in God?" He turned his head so he could see me out of the corner of his eye.

"I don't know." It was the only answer I could give. It was the same answer I gave the rest of the world every time I was asked. I had started this discussion, though

somehow I didn't think it would lead me here. I wanted to know what he believed. I wasn't ready to answer questions about my beliefs. He leaned against me and I struggled to come up with an answer other than the one I had already given.

"When I was in youth group we went to a beach to celebrate the Pagan New Year. We put all our bad thoughts and emotions from the past year into a bag full of breadcrumbs. Then we all took a handful of the breadcrumbs and threw them into the ocean. It was a nice thought." I shut my eyes trying to remember that day more clearly.

"It was a fairly cool day, we went to the beach with no intention of going into the water. When I stood with my toes in the water to my right I could see these high rocks, they were like cliffs. On top of them there was an old Victorian house; it was beautiful. To my left there was nothing but the shore for as far as I could see. Everyone in my youth group was playing Frisbee or walking along the shore trying to see how far it went before they saw some sign of civilization. When the sun began to set the entire beach changed colors, all you could see was the pink and purple sky, and the old Victorian house's silhouette against the horizon. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. I don't know why but I just walked away from everyone else, I walked toward the house. When no one could hear what I said, I whispered 'I'm sorry'. Then the wind began to get strong and pushed my hair in front of my face. I started to cry. I dropped to my knees and began to hum to myself, grateful for the fact that no one was around. At that moment in time, yes, I believed in God. Just now I'm not so sure."

He didn't say anything. I wanted to know what he was thinking. Did he think I was crazy?

"Does that make any sense?"

"I suppose." He normally kept his answers short and to the point. The same thing with his explanations. I felt like I was trying to read a book that had no words, at least none that I understood.

How did I even end up there? A warm caring body in my arms. The same warm body that my best friend had been doting over for the entire length of our friendship.

She compared everyone she had ever been in relationship with to him. Every now and then she would claim that she was over him. She told me that she was okay

with the fact that they were just friends and would never be anything more than that again. Then he would come out to eat with us, or to see a movie. His would be the only name I heard from her mouth for weeks afterward. Her brother and I used to point out his flaws to prove to her that he wasn't perfect. He didn't have many flaws that we could easily see, but we always found a couple. Though they were normally fairly superficial at least they were something.

So what kind of a friend am I? Perhaps, not a very good one. My best friend can't get over this guy for the life of her and I end up going out with him. I'm still not exactly sure how it happened. I know that had certain sentences not been said, it probably would have ended differently.

There was a group of us out celebrating and we ended up at my best friend's house to watch a movie and have virgin strawberry daiquiris. There were enough of us there that I found myself without a seat when we were starting the movie. I stood and looked for a spot I could cram myself into, my strawberry daiquiri in hand, when she said simply, "Go sit on him." She waved her cup in his direction. I didn't really think much of it at the time and sat down. We didn't start the movie then; in fact, we all got up when we had finished our drinks to go play with sparklers. He and I were the first two to head back inside, thinking that everyone was right behind us. He sat back down where he had been, and I followed suit, and sat on him, though this time every seat around us was empty. People filed back in after a while, and we put the movie on. While I sat on his lap he began to rub my back. By the time the movie was over, I was holding his hand.

I was confused. I never thought about him like that before that point. I didn't know much about him. Any conversation we had just the two of us had lasted only a matter of minutes. Why was I holding his hand? Why didn't I want to let go? Why did I tell people I was confused? Why did he leave me his phone number in case I wanted to talk about it? Why did I ask him on a date? Why almost four months later do I find that I love him? What would have happened if she hadn't told me to sit on his lap?

It wouldn't have been this.

Some things seem to be too random to be completely chance. Some things feel like there is an extra hand in the matter. If she hadn't told me to sit on him, I wouldn't have held his hand, I wouldn't have been confused, he wouldn't have given me his phone number, I wouldn't have been able to call him to ask him on a date, we never would have kissed,

and never would have become more than we had already been. How could this all have been chance?

"Yeah, there's just one thing, he's Christian. And I'm... me." I stretched out on my bed, a green phone pressed against my ear.

"Are you feeling okay?" Her voice sounded serious for the first time ever. No, no, I wasn't feeling okay. I liked him so much but couldn't see how it would work. People who had the same beliefs he did told me flat out that I was going to Hell. There are far too many reasons to list why they would say that to me. The main reason has always been that I'm a Unitarian Universalist. I follow the one religion that does not tell you what to believe, only to respect that other people believe different things. I have celebrated Passover, May Day, Christmas, and many other holidays because I've had no defining belief of my own. For this reason, people who have similar beliefs as he does told me I was going to Hell. How could someone damned to Hell find happiness with someone who basks in the Lord's glory? Why would they even try to find happiness together?

Perhaps, because they were supposed to.

Perhaps because that's the way someone else wanted it to be.

There are a lot of things that he sees as being wrong, that I see as a way of being born. I have never read the bible. He believes it to be the inspired word of God. There are so many things that we don't see eye to eye on. There are so many things that could easily tear us apart, yet for some reason they haven't. Over the time that we have been together, I'm finding some of the answers that I have been looking for.

There is a song, which I listen to over and over again. I listen to the words and try to make out what they were written about. It's something that I will never figure out. What I do know is what it means to me.

"It's a leap of faith when you believe there's someone out there."

This time, I'm leaping.



**CHRIS LUNIEWICZ**

*Motion*

## *The Dripping Canvas*

*There stands a single man, a single stool, an easel accompanied by a canvas and paint supplies scattered on the ground nearby. In front of the man is a large area of water, behind it there is a beautiful sunrise being slowly lit from black to very soft yet very white light. A single tree lines the area close to the lake, directly to the left of the easel.*

*It is early morning in the forest on an idle Tuesday. The sun is barely rising as a young painter, mid 20's, sets up his easel on the edge of a gorgeous sparkling lake. As he begins to paint, the voice of a young man is heard from nearby.*

**PAINTER:** *(Alone, talking quietly to himself, almost mumbling.)* You will NOT get up from this stool until you paint. No, not just paint. Paint like you did before money and "success" became everything. Paint like you fucking mean it.

**VOICE:** *(Very loud at first.)* Oh, don't bother. I assure you that you could never paint such a sunrise, sir. Not one nearly as beautiful to say the least.

**PAINTER:** *(Looking around in many directions, yet seeing nothing except the nearby tree.)* Who's there?

**VOICE:** Blind and incompetent? Gee sir, I'm sorry, how unfortunate for you.

**PAINTER:** I'm not incompetent, nor am I blind. Who the hell are you? Or where, rather?

**VOICE:** Okay, perhaps you are not incompetent. But blind, yes.

**PAINTER:** (*Now awkwardly facing the tree, wondering if he should be directing his conversation toward it or not.*) I can see just fine, thank you. Look, here I am, painting this sunrise. How do you suppose I could do that if I couldn't see?

**VOICE:** I didn't say you couldn't see, I said you were blind. Jeez, deaf too? You've got it bad, sir. And as for the sunrise, I suppose anyone could paint a sunrise no matter what time of day, don't you agree? (*The painter continues smearing colors across the canvas, seemingly ignorant of the conversation.*) If you think, though, that you are painting *that* sunrise, I apologize sir, but you are blind.

**PAINTER:** (*His attention is suddenly caught, and his head jerks up quickly to again face the tree, this time less awkwardly.*) Look. (*He points to a place high on the canvas.*) Here are the birds that sit high in your branches. Here is the light of the sun on the water, next to the shadow of your trunk. I've painted you a bit lighter because the darkness makes your bark look worn and old. Now am I blind?

**VOICE:** (*Obvious amusement in his tone but eventually grows serious again.*) Well, good job painting me younger sir, but you're really freaking me out now. I'm not a goddamned tree. You're blind, it's fine, no reason to be ashamed. Damn sir, it's not your fault, or maybe it is. It's not any of my business, sir.

**PAINTER:** (*Rests his head in one hand, frustrated and slightly embarrassed.*) Listen, leave me the hell alone, whoever or wherever you are. I came here because I wanted to be alone. I wanted to paint alone. So leave me the fuck alone.

**VOICE:** Being alone is overrated, don't you think, sir? (*Pause, change of tone to serious.*) I just don't understand why you're so angry. Being blind is nothing to be angry about. It's not your fault, or maybe it is. It's none of my business, sir. I guess if you are a painter then being blind is something to be angry about. I just can't relate, sir. I mean, to painting, yes... but to being a blind painter? Well, certainly not, sir.

**PAINTER:** For the last time, I am not blind!

**VOICE:** *(With a slight chuckle in his voice.)* And I am not a tree. But hey, what do I know?

**PAINTER:** Whatever, just get out of here.

**VOICE:** Easier said than done, sir. I've sort of always been here. My roots run deeper than you can imagine. I do beg your pardon, sir, but you came into my world, not I into yours. You just show up one day and expect me to comply with your demands? I'm truly sorry, sir... I really am, but you are the one who does not belong. And I'm afraid to tell you, sir, but you especially don't belong anywhere near a canvas. You are missing the connection, sir.

**PAINTER:** *(Looking shamefully up at his mess of paint smudges, a sad tone grows in his voice as he speaks slowly.)* I just can't do it anymore. I don't have the time. I don't have the patience. I don't even have the fucking talent anymore. *(Now, seemingly speaking to himself rather than anyone else.)* I wanted this more than anything. It just seemed like a childish dream.

**VOICE:** *(Chiming in at an obvious chance to poke fun.)* Childish is right. Lovely tree, sir.

*Suddenly the young painter stands straight up from his stool. With an aggravated force he pushes the easel hard. It crashes into the lake. He watches as the paints smear together and the water's surface acquires an expected film of oil.*

**VOICE:** Every time a critic comes along you just give up. Well done, sir, now it will all be ruined again. You're still blind, aren't you, sir? Still you don't see the connection. I am you, you are me. Don't you see? I'm no fucking tree!

*With a sudden realization, the man plunges into the lake, desperately trying to grasp the canvas and pull it to safety. But he can't. He's drowning in the mess of paint and oil. He looks up to see the canvas slowly drift ashore, dripping into a beautiful sunrise. But he can't get to it. He's dripping, too. No... he's drowning.*

**PAINTER:** Save Me! Please!

**VOICE:** What for? You never saved me...

*The stage goes black.*

*The light slowly illuminates a small bedroom. The man sits suddenly straight up. Not drowning. Alive. The only thing dripping is the sweat from his entire body. He notices that he is still wearing his suit and tie from work the previous day. He quickly stands up and rummages through a pile of paperwork and briefcases stacked high in the right hand corner of the room. He pulls out an easel and a dusty box of paint supplies. He sets up and walks slowly over to a large window and opens the shade. The sun is barely rising and he begins to paint.*

## *Foundation*

I could hear my son rattling away above me, in the garage attic. Twenty-five, out of college at long last, and finally getting his first real job – but not able to support himself yet, and so living in Mummy's garage.

I had been reluctant from the beginning, remembering the back and forth of his teenage years. Late-night partying had exited my life when he left for college, and I was content with that arrangement. My sneaky idea, while still caring for my son, was to offer the garage attic. It was certainly not fit for partying, and more than likely not fit for habitation. I would be free from the inconvenient position of mother to an overgrown teen, but still have offered him a place in my home.

Imagine my surprise when he expressed having the same idea, and wanting to clean it out this very weekend! Well, the floor was surely rotting away, animals and leaks would have seen to that. I agreed to help him, and sorted boxes and junk as he handed them down from the precarious ladder that lowered from the attic.

"Trevor," I called as a dust-grayed snowboard clattered to the cement floor beside me. "How does the floor look? If there's any question of the foundation being unstable, I'm not letting you stay here."

"Mom," Trevor protested, dumping a box of dusty, moldy books by the edge of the ladder. "Let me get this stuff out, then worry about the floor, okay? I'm sure I've got a solid enough foundation for bookshelves and everything, though. You'll see."

"You've never supported books yourself, let's talk about that before we even discuss an ancient garage attic's doing so," I muttered just loudly enough that he could hear me – but could ignore at will.

"Mom," Trevor acknowledged my comment with a longsuffering sigh and returned to his dredging of twenty years' clutter. "This is a mess, you know that?"

"You know why," I almost snapped at him, grunting under the unexpected weight of the moldy books. Soggy paper weighs more than lead, especially on a shaky, spring-

loaded staircase. "If your father hadn't passed on that summer, we would have refurbished the whole garage. As it was, getting you to hang around the house was hard enough, and I finally had to give up on getting everything permanently relocated. The basement flooded every spring back then, you realize."

"I know," Trevor sounded more than just weary with my words, and I suddenly felt preachy and foolish. Yes, he knew. He'd had a hard time of it as well, protesting the whole time that he could take over his father's work around the house. But he was only fourteen at the time, and young teenagers simply cannot follow through with responsibilities like that. Goodness knew his father had enough trouble with responsibility, and he'd been a full-grown adult!

Trevor had been young when his father died. Although he'd never had a very rosy perspective on his dad, he hadn't known much about his father's shortcomings until more recently. Which hadn't helped him in his sympathies toward his mother, you may be sure. The mere possibility that a father, a man in his life, might have vetoed any decision of mine Trevor contested – that possibility kept me on trial. A case of WWDD, with "Dad" inserted for "Jesus," haunted our relationship.

However, since an outburst a couple of years ago, when he'd used that line one too many times, "*Dad* would have—," and I responded in the heat of the moment with any dirt I could recall off the top of my head... Well, I'd been sorry, but Trevor had been glad to know a little more of the truth about his father.

"I know you know," I sighed. A copy of *Pride and Prejudice* disintegrated in my hand. "I just wish things could have been more solid."

"Don't worry, mom, I haven't fallen through yet!" Trevor handed a pair of cross-country skis down to me, grinning reassuringly. As I turned to prop them against the garage wall, I heard him stomp across the attic floor.

"Trevor!" I called anxiously, though it came out more angry than concerned. "Stop that! You're going to fall through!"

"That's what you've always told me," Trevor called casually from the far end of the attic. "Oh, I found my yearbooks. And yours. Why are they all together up here? A kid's idea of logic, I guess – nothing by date, just all the yearbooks together."

"What years?" My worry was forgotten as soon as his footsteps quieted. Yearbooks were even better than

scrapbooks, in my opinion. I wondered fleetingly if Trevor had brought his college yearbooks home with him.

"Oh, tenth grade and senior year," Trevor came to stand above the ladder. "For you, there's just your senior year of college."

"Oh." It was that idea of a school year, with the drama and happenings, the friends and enemies, the haircuts, clothing, parties, conversations, school assignments, drama productions, fights, football games, and relationships all pressed in the pages of a book like so many dry leaves – that idea was my favorite.

"There you go," Trevor handed them down to me, not even cracking one open. I was much more eager.

"I recognize these kids," I called excitedly as Trevor resumed moving around above me. "Your girlfriend, Kay, was that the year she moved to town? And Joey and Michael, I remember those wild campouts in the backyard!"

"Ex-girlfriend," Trevor handed me a snow shovel without making eye contact.

I was silent for a moment, holding the large blue shovel, shocked that Trevor could have pushed Kay out of his life. The moment grew, and I shook my head slowly. The shovel was set alongside the skis.

A half hour passed, and while I hated to be sulky, I suspected my behavior of reflecting that attitude. What could have happened? Why was Trevor unable to hold a job, finish college on schedule, or even keep a girlfriend? Was there something inherently wrong with his support system – me? Had I given him every bit of upkeep that I could? I couldn't take that much responsibility, my senses rejected that idea. But how could a fourteen-year-old strengthen his own character?

I thought back to my motives in cleaning out the garage. I was not a bad mother, I decided. I was a busy mother. He had managed college, though he might have done slightly better with a stay-at-home parent. Now I was supporting his independence by encouraging him to move out on his own. It was less than ideal, but it was not exactly bad.

"Mom," Trevor interrupted my commute between garage and newly altered basement that no longer flooded annually. "I broke up with her. She was cheating."

"What?" I was surprised that Trevor had broken the long-standing silence between mother and son. The secretive my-generation-your-generation, superiority of our own ideas silence – broken. Twenty-five, and maybe he was finally able to talk to his mother?

"She was cheating," Trevor repeated patiently. "With another guy, on her midterms, from her boss – you name it. I think she might have been pathological."

"Really?" I was surprised to hear the word pathological come from Trevor, let alone in reference to the girl I'd never really trusted. It was one thing to have a son who couldn't keep a girl. It was rather a different matter to have a thoughtful, discriminating son. I wondered how long he'd been looking for character in his friends.

"Yeah," Trevor replied. "Set me back a few semesters, too, when she dragged me into the investigation. That's actually why I retook so many classes."

I dumped the area rugs I'd been lifting, and ran to the ladder.

"She set you back in your work? You weren't partying?"

"Mom," Trevor shook his head, surveying the attic around him. "Loud music, a few friends, and you think we're getting wasted. College partying was always way out of my league."

"Oh." I would have to retract a few statements I'd made about understanding party animal parenting problems. It was becoming unexpectedly clear that I had no idea. "You didn't drink?"

"Wine with professors, Mom," Trevor smirked. "I tried alcohol when I lived here, that's for sure, but just enough to decide I like wine and didn't like hangovers."

"Where is Kay now?" Having recovered from my surprise at his revealed nobility of character with alcoholic drink, I now maternally wanted to hunt down the perceived cause behind his failures. Could he actually be so innocent in the teenage drama he'd inflicted upon my world?

"Who knows," Trevor was finally climbing down the ladder. "She dropped out last year."

"Wow," I scooped up the area rug. "You mean all that?"

"Yeah," Trevor grabbed a laundry basket filled with old blankets. "You really fixed up the basement? No more floods?"

"No more floods," I smiled. It had been the year for fixing up the house and yard, and I was proud of how much I had accomplished. A single woman could still manage to work wonders, even into her fifties!

After making several more trips to the basement, I excused myself from the last of the mess to start dinner. I only looked up from the chicken and vegetables once in the

next hour, when Trevor trotted by with a bucket of water and a mop.

"Trevor," I called him back into the kitchen. "What are you doing?"

"Washing the floor, Mom." Trevor shrugged impatiently, slopping water on the tile floor. "Just trust me."

"That floor was never finished, washing it will make a huge mess!" I protested vehemently. "If your father had been around even a few more months, the wood up in that attic would have been laid and fixed up. I've been telling you this all day!"

"Well, then," Trevor hesitated, thinking hard about what I'd told him. "I'll wash my car. I've got all this ready, I might as well do something with it."

I shrugged. He took off so quickly that there was no doubt in my mind. He was off to the garage attic, to do a job that would probably prove the attic uninhabitable. I was surprised at how disappointed I was when faced with the success of my plan. I suppose that a son who doesn't party, and does apply himself to schoolwork, isn't a half bad houseguest after all. Pity he only mentioned it now.

Dinner cooked, I set the table, and time passed in the garage as well. Finally, I was forced to go and get Trevor from the garage attic. Yes, he was there, trying to carry a mop and half-full bucket down the ladder.

"Satisfied?" I asked gently, not to rub his face in his disappointment.

"Very," Trevor's eyes glowed. "Go look!"

When I indulgently climbed the ladder at Trevor's urging, I could smell the cleaner he had used on the old wood. It would do nothing, though; it had been bare and weathered for so many years. I pulled myself up through the hole in the attic floor, and looked in astonishment at a softly glowing polish.

The old floorboards, that I had imagined piled against a wall and ruined, were finished in a light blond stain. The thick coats of protection painstakingly applied had withstood years of weather.

"Sometimes the best work holds up over years of neglect," Trevor said quietly.

When I climbed down from the attic, Trevor took my hand and steadied me as I lighted from the lowest rung.

*The Way It Wasn't*

Garbage scented low tide.  
Bare feet scratching shells and sand.  
My cool morning fingers  
Lost in Daddy's warm hand.  
Sleepy sun hints of the  
heat to come.  
Dawn's neutral hue  
slips into color  
as unseen brushes  
touch gray to blue  
sky...  
sea...  
boats...  
Gulls wake screaming for  
their breakfast –  
No blueberry pancakes  
for them.  
We ate them all  
smothered in syrup.  
Leaving dishes for  
Momma.  
A reward for not  
Rising to catch the tide.

*The Blues*

I listen for the  
strings to pull me  
into their magic.  
Allowing me to  
lose all cares  
as it sings of  
lost family  
lost love  
found freedom  
stories untold

I can stretch my arm  
and pull out the music  
of the ages.  
Rifts following melody  
following beat.  
Percussion accents the  
digits picking harmony,  
answering echoes of lost dreams.

*The Pond*

I linger in the fading sun  
My list of chores still undone.  
The pair of ducks I'm watching here  
Swim in silence, nothing to fear.  
The birches are white against the sky  
And here, no there, small birds fly.  
I'm anxious as I mark the time  
My thoughts removed from the sublime.  
But still I watch the loveducks dance  
Envious of their spring romance.



**BRYAN KILLELEA**

*Waterfall*

## *The Welcomed Hand*

"You can never tell what's coming up around the corner!" Boy, that old saying certainly has rung true for me over the years. My path has swerved up the curvaceous, mountainside trails and swayed down the meandering country lanes, passing vistas dark and deep and landscapes light and brilliant. Occasionally, when rounding the bend, the path has been speckled with nature's gems that are definitely unexpected and virtually impossible to miss. My buddy, Sis, is one of those unavoidable diamonds in the rough. Situated squarely in the middle of my path, our unexpected friendship is, well, you'll see. I'm getting ahead of myself.

It all started with moving, something I've done often over the years for my career. Moving back east to sell the family home, though, was not my idea of an exciting career move. The old homestead was built in 1900 and held within its walls forty years of family history. It had taken me nearly a year to get her looking as pretty as a perfectly iced wedding cake, and then it sold so quickly I hadn't even figured out a future game plan. The plan was not only for me, but for my new companion, Pearl - my mom! In passing, someone had once said that New Hampshire would be a nice place for Pearl to retire. Visions of forever leaving the fast-paced L.A., and living the rural life sounded really right to me.

The magic number was sixty days - the time span to find us a new place. So, every chance I got I headed toward the Mt. Monadnock region, and toured the area either solo or with real estate agents. One day, exhausted and very frustrated, I stopped into an old, worn-out A&P to pick up some cigs. The store looked as bad as I felt, and I remember chuckling to myself that we must share the same birth year! Once inside, the fabulously low price of cigarettes completely distracted me from the neglected interior. I talked myself right into buying a carton (thus reaping some benefit from the day). I headed to the cash registers and, at first glance, the sole cashier looked older than Mt. Monadnock herself. She rang me up and as I went for cash, I realized that I was short by about five dollars. Quickly, I apologized to the

woman and said that I better only buy a few packs. Without missing a beat, this ancient relative of Mt. Monadnock pulled out her wallet, which was conveniently hanging from a string around her neck. She said, "No problem - pay me next time you're in." Well, I don't know if it was too many years in L.A. or my exhaustion from dealing with real estate agents, but the gesture truly won me over.

When I returned to repay my debt, I started to think of another saying ("Assuming makes an ass out of you and me"), which truly applied here. How my quick, little, judgmental write-offs from first impressions might have cancelled out a chance encounter that could change my life. I felt relieved to see the generous lady manning her cash register. I happily waited as she methodically handled each customer in front of me. While waiting, I decided "Speedy" was one nickname that she'd never have, but her down-home style was definitely an original. When my time came, I expressed my appreciation for her generosity and handed her a five-dollar bill. I remember we laughed about interest being due and then she said, "I never look at who I lend money to. Just in case they don't pay me back, I won't have to know who they are." I sensed immediately that this senior citizen was a definite candidate for my A-list. With a lucky lull in customers, Sis and I proceeded to shoot the breeze and, as city people can do, I filled her in on my dilemma in a matter of minutes. Her response once again set me back as she told me how hunting for coffee and bathrooms on the road didn't sound like much fun. The next time I came through town she'd have a spare set of keys for me to borrow. I refused, but did go ahead to set up a time to share lunch together. Of course, little did I know that small miracles were just around the corner.

Over that fateful lunch, it became apparent that Sis had some real disabilities that she seemed to live with very matter-of-factly. Instinctively, my voice started crescendoing to compensate for her partial deafness. I noticed my quickness to clean up for her semi-blindness, arranging her ashtrays to catch that lingering ash that seemed to defy gravity as it held on, teetering on the end of her cigarette. As our lunch came to an end, and our conversation started winding down, Sis casually mentioned a condo across the way, which hadn't yet gone on the market. My ears perked up, my adrenaline kicked in, and off I went to explore another possibility for me and Pearl. You might deduce, and correctly so, that the condo became mine. I'm still in it to this day.

The dynamics of mine and Sis' friendship just kept expanding in funny, sweet, coincidental ways. On the day my mom and I moved in, Sis visited the moving madness, only to announce coolly that she had just won fifty thousand dollars on a scratch ticket. In the same breath, she officially named Pearl and me as her luckiest charms of all time! Her beloved primrose, which hadn't bloomed in two years, bloomed that first year on the exact day of Pearl's birthday, followed by an encore on mine and then again on Sis's birthday. We named that plant *Perchesis*, after the three of us. It is still going strong (in season), but it seems to have forgotten our birthdays.

What followed those delightful beginnings were many Friday night dinners and morning coffee klatches. Our lives unfolded as we shared memories with each other that made us who we are. She had a memory to beat the band, and would pepper her stories with lyrics and classic melodies from the '30's and '40's. Our talks were layered with hilarious highs, tearful lows, and lots of mellowness in between. A spirited gambler from the "git go" as she says, she once estimated her winnings and losses to be more than one hundred thousand dollars over her lifetime. She said it all began as a little girl, shopping for her mom, who ran an Irish boarding house in Rockaway, Long Island. She learned early how to count change and knew the best cuts of beef, and when to demand better. One local proprietor was a gambler himself and for a long time stumped Sis, often winning her nickel with this one: "Heads I win, tails you lose." She would head home, scratching her head, even more determined that she'd win the following day.

Gambling played a serious role in her life, when she tragically lent her entire nest to her newly-married sister, losing forever the chance to have her own home. That was followed by a move to New Hampshire in the 1950's, to aid again her sister's family. In return, she received discouragement as to ideas of marriage or any professional development. Those tales truly broke my heart. She shared her life's injustices for the first time with someone, and with it I saw a rock-hard crystal of pain dissolve. Her solidness of self shone through all of her actions and decisions, and thankfully, dwelling in the past was not her style.

A lovely protective innocence seemed to bundle Sis up from life's high gale winds of regret. She never desired to retaliate for all those stolen nickels and she never stood up to sister to reclaim what was rightfully hers. She never complained about being called "Sis" or being known only as Mary's sister. It angered me at times, her complacency, but

to no avail. The milk was spilled and she proudly carried on, knowing her intentions were true.

Her last position starting at seventy years of age, with the A&P, had her finally coming into her own. It was to be a part-time job for a couple of years, which ended up taking two heart attacks (at eighty-five years old) to make her admit that the time had come for her to retire. She had her crowd of regulars, and everyone wanted to be in Sis's cashier line. She truly found her element there, and displayed that old Yankee "stick-to-itiveness" right up to the very end.

Nowadays, I tell Sis often that I love her. She is relegated to home, still smoking and watching CNN, Jeopardy and Perry Mason all day long. Bingo is her high point on weekend nights, and if asked, she says that she is on the rebound from a miserable losing streak! Sis, to me, is just one of those gems of nature's bounty, whose spirit I will carry with me always. She brought new meaning to the word "welcome" and understanding to what "true blue" really means.

## *Growing Old and Staying Young*

Youth and naïveté, once lost, can never be returned. Each person reaches a point in his life when the calloused hand of reality strikes him in the face. But, after the initial sting, the mere idea of exchanging knowledge for innocence and immaturity is repulsive. Harsh, cold reality hit me when I was an immature and foolish ten-year-old. In my sheltered life, there was little need for me to mature quickly. My loving parents looked to my every need, my older sisters kept me from most of the trouble that I could have been in. My brother, Andy – being thirteen months older than I – was “man of the house” when my father was at work. I had no responsibilities and thoroughly enjoyed that situation. This coddled environment was merely an extenuation of the love that I received at a young age.

At the age of three months, I was placed on an airplane in my native land of South Korea. Thousands of miles away, my adoptive parents were journeying to New York to meet me. Imagine the difference this one trans-Pacific flight made in my life. Instead of eking out an existence on a rice paddy or living on the streets of a city, I live in a big house as the adopted son of Mr. and Mrs. Bowditch in the United States of America.

After five years, my family moved to the rural community of Rindge, New Hampshire. Andy and I spent many hours playing in the woods, stockpiling “weapons” and starting a thousand forts that would never be finished. I was the baby boy in the family and had very few productive tasks that I needed to accomplish. My days were spent carelessly. In my mind, growing up was something to think about many years later.

When I was approximately eight years old, my family moved to Fitchburg, Massachusetts. For quite some time, my parents had been concerned about Andy. My underdeveloped powers of observation lent me little understanding concerning my brother’s mood swings and temper tantrums. But in October of that memorable year, comprehension burst upon my consciousness. Unbeknownst

to me, my parents had been taking Andy to various mental hospitals and counseling facilities. One night around suppertime, my sisters and I received a phone call. My parents were calling with the news that Andy was going into the hospital for an extended period of time. I remember that I was looking into one of our kitchen cabinets when we got the call. I remember crying when my sister relayed the message to me. It was at that time that I connected Andy's scholastic lethargy and his mood swings. In my juvenile simplicity, I asked my sisters, "Is Andy going to have to be put down?" My only other experience with a serious illness up to that time was when our cat had developed liver cancer and had to be put to sleep. I foolishly thought that weakness was a problem that could just be put away. I missed the whole premise of human social interaction and the foundation on which I had been adopted: the protection of the underprivileged and less fortunate.

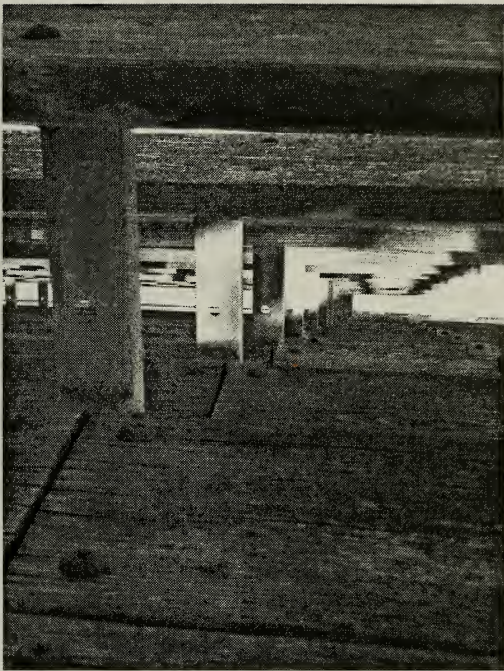
As we visited Andy in the hospital and when he finally came home, the proverbial scales fell from my eyes. Glaring differences became visible between him and myself that I had never noticed. For example, being slightly spoiled and only eight years old, my first instinct was to cry when I didn't get what I wanted. But Andy would become enraged in similar situations. I remember that during one of Andy's temper tantrums, while he was arguing with my dad, Andy threw a steak knife into the dining room wall. During those years, doctors spent several years adjusting Andy's medication to get him to his present state of stability.

However, even though certain medications could counteract my brother's disabilities, no medication could cure him. He would always be, mentally and emotionally, an eight year old. No longer was I the younger brother, the "baby of the family." Suddenly I was the one with responsibilities; I was called upon to step up and help. I was faced with a choice. I could either stay immature and take away some of the attention that Andy so desperately needed, or I could start to mature and help shoulder some of the responsibility of supporting him. Responsibility was shoved into my hands, and I grasped hold of it. For several years, I didn't look back; I didn't look around. I was like a drowning man, struggling to keep myself afloat. But recently, having "learned to swim," I had time to look around.

The teenagers around me, my peers, seemed very immature, even foolish. While some of my friends found themselves in and out of "love," dragging everyone they could move into their relationships as pawns, I decided to avoid dating anyone until I was ready to get married.

Although “prudish” by today’s standards, this decision was made by spiritual, emotional, physical, social, and economic reasoning. Also, at that stage of life, when I knew what I was going to do with my life, my peers were concerned with who had and hadn’t talked to them over the last three days. For a while, this – as I perceived it – pettiness annoyed me. Why did my friends insist on acting so immature? Now I have realized that most of the people in the world do not have to grow up quickly. Is that wrong or unfair? I don’t believe so. God wants some people to grow up faster than others; and in the end, it’s often hard to tell who has had to grow up early and who has been allowed to mature at his own pace.

These days, my brother has stabilized significantly. This school year he is wading through the fifth grade. Like an average elementary student, Andy loves to play with his building sets. When I watch him, his actions remind me of what I was like at eight years old. He looks up to me as if I were the elder, and I, in turn, look at him as if he were my younger brother. I try to look after him, and I try to keep him from looking bad in public. However, I also get mad at him; he annoys me more than a colony of ants down my trousers. Yet through it all, I love my brother. He’ll never be mentally older than an eight year old; he will probably never be able to live by himself. But, he will always be my brother. As both of us age physically, I grow old while Andy stays young.



DAN LACRUZ

*Holes*

*he preferred to call it redemption*

you gave your heart to the girl with the match, and inside of  
her shaky bones and fleeting breath is where you've made  
your home. she lit the fire and you watched her burn.

and i will be the water, to engulf anything that's left.

there will be no final thought and there will be no last regret.  
there will be no extra space and there will be no eventual  
truth. soft tissue organs have our same capacity for error. so  
please sit still and quiet within the last white walled box of  
honesty that you have left. twelve feet by twelve feet to  
consume, as you watch revelation dress itself up as tragedy.

the color scheme is blinding, the chair is made of metal, and  
the bed beside you is empty.

hospital corners and paper gowns don't lie.

your heart is gone.  
your heart is gone.  
and your home is long burned down.

a man with gray eyebrows and a plaid shirt once told me that  
god is spelled with a capital g. i asked him if he knew  
anything about salvation, and then i told him that sometimes  
i believe in fate,

but other times i'm not so sure.

*i knew the number but i never  
dialed the phone*

this is thunder  
and this is electric.

i am electric and i am the storm,  
rolling in.  
and really,  
you know that once i've gotten going,  
you just can't stop the wind.

i'm ten percent clarity and ten percent truth, the rest of me is  
metaphor, or at least that's what i think.

sometimes i am white posts crossed with white beams,  
kept in a cage of glass.  
drinking from the cup of self preservation,  
and reversing transformation.

watching the liquid trickle down into my stomach,  
because my skin is clear.

i'm crystal fucking clear.

my alter ego is concrete and steel.  
and as my rhythmic motor hums, my metal posts sway.  
and as strong as i feel  
i wonder why this junkyard mess,  
has  
finally  
taken  
my  
place?

i'm feeling a little less and ignoring a little more.  
i watch with the sound turned off  
and my eyes closed.

we're numb to hunger and we're numb to pain  
and when a gun fires in our direction and all the exits are

closed,  
i'll remember the blood that's pumping,  
keeping me alive.

because what about the kids on the television commercials  
with flies on their faces?  
their bodies are inside out.  
their bodies are paper thin.

they're inside out.  
and i'm inside out.  
but we didn't save the children,  
and instead, we saved ourselves.

they are full of blood too you know.

*ink refill cartridges*

days pass  
to the message of our legs  
entangled and intertwined  
to the rhythm of infatuation  
hoping  
somewhere  
to find  
the heat against your hips  
and the pressure that sits  
wrapped up in my lips.  
as wire winds  
against the sound  
of our design.  
fashioned,  
with some still breathing surprise.  
at different degrees  
my eyes hide  
the string of your ghost,  
on days  
when i miss it the most.  
to coexist  
and stretch your range of vision  
or somehow  
to shorten mine.  
i wrote to you until the little metal ball inside of my pen  
finally gave out.  
it rolled  
and revolved  
and spread itself too thin.

*permanence is more substantial than noise*

at first the words will twist and contort  
like the laces of your shoes  
or the ventricles of my heart.  
and on a string, i will dangle  
above city limits and cemetery walls.  
above changing seasons,  
and the farfetched idea  
of skin over stone.  
carve me underneath an image too vague to recount.  
transcend and transpose.  
untangle the reels  
and replay your heart  
on a black and white movie screen.

the film is playing  
but still  
it never makes a sound.

*sarcasm says that talking is overrated*

i've got a crooked smile and you've got a broken jaw, and on the other side of the world we've both got ties to someone fighting a war. too much silence can sometimes be misleading, so please, will you open your passive mouth? the same noise just keeps repeating, and none of these voices are ours.

i think that the meaning of certain words is conflicting in your book versus mine. if this was never about fairness or our desire to coexist, then what was your motive, boy? then what was your fucking excuse?

this was never our space to occupy and this was never anyone's fight to fight.  
but that slow talking voice says rush and invade.  
and please,  
when you do,  
do not forget to hold your gun strong and proud.  
because someone has to die while trying to kill someone else,  
if we all want peace in the end.

damage control,  
i'm calling  
because i think they've washed our brains.

the explanation is still the same: we're really here to help.  
violence to acquire peace? we don't understand, but we don't ask either.

red lettered exit signs are hung on either door.

we're really just here to help.  
though we never really mean what we say,  
or maybe we just don't listen hard enough?  
maybe it's the language barrier  
or a television failure.  
but don't worry  
because someone will blame this mistake on human nature

and accidental error.  
we knew better  
but we can pretend that we didn't,  
and somehow we've been made to think  
that this will make it all okay.



**KATEY CARLSON**

*Bridge*

*Broken in Baltimore*

As I pace the living room floor between our hand-me-down sofa and recliner, I feel as if I'm trapped between a rock and a hard place. Every time I think about the extreme likelihood of my husband having an affair, it's as if a two-ton boulder straight out of the Grand Canyon is resting on my shoulders, pushing me farther and farther into the ground. Atlas has nothing on me. I know if I continue to bother Greg with these growing insecurities, the repercussions of that decision would rock my world like an earthquake wreaking havoc in Southern California.

Should I just let be and trust Greg will come clean on his own or should I demand an explanation, the truth, about what I believe is happening behind close doors? Needless to say we've been having problems as of late and every time I approach Greg with even the tiniest concern, he shuts me out. God, how would he react if he were in my position? Knowing Greg, he'd throw one of his Oscar-worthy temper tantrums and then resort to name-calling, which has always been his forte. Lately, his wrath has been as powerful and frightening as a Venezuelan mudslide and I'm the helpless village below. Once Greg's done pounding his fists and feet into the floor, he dries his little eyes and often seeks refuge at his mother's house, which is only a stone's throw away from here. Man, I wish that woman would move to Mexico or something. Wanna feast your eyes on Big Foot, forget looking in the hilly Alaskan terrain, just head over to 666 Huntington Avenue and peer through the window. Sometimes I wonder who's worse, Greg or my bitch of a mother-in-law. The first time I met her she was wielding a butcher's knife, chasing after the paperboy whom she claimed took a leak on her rose bush. What a freak. You know the old saying the apple doesn't fall far from the tree, well, I for one believe that. They think alike, act alike, and both do one hell of a job of pushing my buttons, but it would be unfair not to give the edge to Lorraine. If there are any similarities between her and a human, it's purely coincidental. That woman isn't somebody you'd want to argue with over any issue whether it be politics, religion, sex, or even the damn weather. You say "hi" to the lady and she

thinks you're trying to pick a fight. For her grandson's sake, I'm going to do everything possible to make sure she stays out of this rumble. They'll be many more arguments for her to add her two cents to but this one is strictly between Greg and me.

I'm scared. I just feel so out-numbered. This is the type of situation where a girl would call up her best friend and vent to her for hours, but in my case, I can't do that because my best friend is the one my husband is fooling around with. That's right, Lori, my best friend – excuse me, ex-best friend – of eight solid years has been sleeping with my husband behind my back, or at least she thinks it's been behind my back. I'm no Einstein, hell, I can count the number of days I've spent in a classroom on one hand, but I think I'm smart enough to realize when I'm being played for a fool. Granted, they've known each other for a while now, but I've seen the way he looks at her and the way they flirt whenever she's over the house, you'd have to be on mushrooms not to notice. Yeah, Lori's good-looking I guess, but she's nothing to write home about, though I'm sure Greg would tell you different. I met her at the bank one day about a month after getting back to Baltimore. She was kind enough to point out that I had dropped my wallet in the parking lot and up until now, we were like two peas in a pod. Sounds corny, I know, but I loved her like a sister. Now all she's interested in is Greg so the hell with our friendship. Those two hook up every chance they get. At Lori's apartment, at my mother-in-law's, and they even meet up at Suds for Scents on Main Street to "wash" their cars together and split the cost. Sure, I was born at night but not last night. And while Greg's out being tempted by the fruit of another, I'm busting my ass at the Valu-Mart as a cashier working six nights a week so we can at least enjoy the pleasure of hot water while my poor little boy spends yet another evening with the "Queen of Hearts"; it's nice to know Lorraine's good for something. Greg insists there's nothing going on between them, Lori too, but I know better. My friend Becky says I should, once and for all, leave Greg and move back to Kansas to live with my mother. No way! I'd rather eat glass than go back to living with that gypsy.

Back when I was just a knee-high surprise, my mother divorced my father and took me cross-country so she and I could "find ourselves," whatever that meant. We never spent more than a month in one spot, which really takes its toll on a toddler. I really missed my dad back in Baltimore and shivered at the thought of never seeing him again but my tears didn't faze my mother in the least.

Yeah, so, she and I lived in and out of giant duffle bags that were tattooed with peace signs and anti-war slogans, though I never understood what war it was in reference to. She probably stole them from homeless, old war veterans for all I know. She'd always say, "Remember Alicia, it's a dog eat dog world out there so we always gotta look out for number one." Yeah, meaning herself. That woman never sacrificed anything for me growing up. In fact, I remember when I was about fifteen years old, she sold my ruby necklace my father had given to me for my first birthday. I never took it off until the day she told me we would starve to death if she didn't pawn it; little did she know I had later found the freezer-size bag of pot she tucked up inside one of her shoes. I bet my life she bought it from this nasty drunk we had met up with at one of these rundown service stations on the outskirts of town. You know, the kind that is infested with low-life biker bums dressed from head to toe in cheap, tight leather. I'm twenty-six and I remember that expedition from hell like it was yesterday. I'd give anything to have my mind erased.

As soon as I hit eighteen, I bolted, leaving my mother wallowing in her own self-pity. I found her expired driver's license along with an AAA card in a coffee can that listed our address back in Baltimore. She begged me to stay and kept saying she'd never be able to go it alone. Tell someone who cares, I thought. I packed up what few personal belongings I had left and hitchhiked back East. For my mother, reality struck hard in Wichita, but the only person I had on my mind was my stranger of a father, who I hoped was still living at 531 Arlington Boulevard.

I wish I could be assertive with Greg the same way I was with my mother. I had no problem telling her to go to hell but when it comes to Greg, I usually keel over and play dead. He's got these hypnotic brown, gold-laced eyes that cast a spell over my entire body and freeze me in place. Just when I have something I want to scream at him about, those eyes take hold and paralyze my thought process. I wish I could rewind to the days when Greg and I first started dating or even back to our newlywed months. Those times were seemingly perfect. Greg has always had somewhat of a short fuse, but he was a wonderful boyfriend and very seldom did we bicker. He did all the usual gentleman things at the beginning like holding doors open for me, surprising me with flowers and candy for no apparent reason, and he'd even call me up in the middle of the night just to listen to me breathe. It felt like something out of a fairy tale. Now to enjoy affection like this I must resort to living vicariously through

romance novel heroines. Pathetic, huh? No, what's sad is that I actually admitted it. What happened, you ask? Greg's mom, that's my theory anyway. Ever since Lorraine started making our business her business, she's been nothing but a thorn in my side. My thinking is that she's still sore Greg didn't marry some sophisticated goody two shoes with a size two waist and a killer trust fund. Well excuse me, but I think I've done pretty damn good for myself up to this point, making very little money and still being able to take care of her grandchild the best way I know how. Brian's a terrific son and what's better is that he takes after me in all the important areas, so far anyway. I hope he never changes because he's basically all I have now.

Believe me, Greg's far from being perfect himself. Did I mention where Greg and I met? An AA meeting. It was my father who pushed me into going and seeing as how I was back living under his roof, I didn't argue. I was just thrilled to finally have someone to love and take care for me. Hell, I'd been drinking since I was fourteen (unbeknownst to my father) and by twenty-two, I was pretty sure my liver resembled Swiss cheese but I indulged my father anyway. Thankfully, AA straightened me out where I had been bent by my mother's bad influence.

At that time, Greg and his mother had just moved to Baltimore and were looking to start a new life for themselves. I noticed him right off the bat. He was so cute with his spiky, black hair, dimply smile, and those eyes, those big, brown eyes! I worshipped him from afar for a good five or six sessions until the day he came over and introduced himself. He was only a year older than I and we seemed to have a lot in common. I wasn't excited about "graduating" AA only because I figured I would never see Greg again but by our last session, he finally asked me out and I accepted. He took me to this quaint, little Irish restaurant and insisted upon picking up the \$63.13 tab himself. Such a sweetie. Only three weeks had passed, but things were quickly starting to get serious between us. One mid-April afternoon, Greg talked me into calling in sick and taking a road trip out to Crystal Lake. That evening, we laid on the hood of Greg's sooped up '88 emerald-green Mustang and stared up into the star-splattered sky. The air was thick with the scent of peach perfume and lilacs, which were draped over a stone wall we had thrown our sweatshirts on. I was falling for this guy and knew right then and there that he was the one I was going to marry. And that's exactly what I did four months later, five months into my pregnancy.

As soon as I got the news from the clinic downtown, I threw up, and no, it wasn't because of morning sickness, I was petrified. Luckily, my father was very supportive which helped to raise my spirits. Greg, on the other hand, freaked and sought comfort from his good friend, Jack Daniels. So much for AA. I had conflicting feelings about having a baby at such a young age and I'm not going to lie, getting an abortion did cross my mind. My father assured me that everything would work out fine and after Greg dried out, I pleaded with him to lose the booze. Surprisingly, he listened. I was feeling better.

Unfortunately, I wasn't out of the woods yet because Greg still had to tell his mother and when she found out, she marched over to my house, still in her bathrobe and slippers, and demanded I give her an explanation as to how I could do this to her son. I was floored. Here's this woman I'd met once, maybe twice, and she had the audacity to charge at me like a pit bull and ream me out on my own front porch. That day, even my home field advantage couldn't have saved me from getting sacked. She was out for blood, mine.

When Brian was born, Lorraine's doctor did us all a favor and prescribed tranquilizers. Now I figured our relationship would no longer be a giant chess match, what with her living in a cloud. We learned to act cordial towards each other but were never close by any means. My father passed away two weeks before I had Brian and left everything in my name. The house, the car, and \$15,000 worth of savings bonds, which went straight into the bank to aid in paying what was left on the mortgage. Naturally, Greg and I didn't look around for another house because we just couldn't afford anything else. Lorraine was pissed that we didn't come live with her because she thought I couldn't handle the pressures of motherhood. Stupid tranquilizers. I told her to get bent. Greg scolded me and said his mother was "just trying to be helpful". All she was to me was a convenient babysitter that I didn't have to pay. After I showed her how competent I was with Brian, I threatened to slap her with some sort of restraining order if she refused to butt out. That was just big talk on my part, but she could see I meant business and didn't argue. She promised she'd mind her P's and Q's but that pledge lasted as long as a Life Saver.

I hope Greg gets home soon, the roads look like they're getting worse. I wonder how I should start the conversation. I know just what he'll say too.

"Stop reading into shit that's not there, baby."

"You're always breathing down my neck about something stupid and I'm getting pretty damn tired of it."

"I'm a grown man who can pick and choose his own friends".... Blah, blah, blah. There's no reasoning with him. I used to be able to talk good sense through his thick skull but that crazy mother-in-law of mine has this voodoo power over him that seems to get stronger and stronger with each passing day. Makes me sick to my stomach. Lorraine's hated me from day one and my guess is she's mixed up in this nightmare somehow. Yeah, I bet it was her idea to push Greg and Lori together, it's the ultimate checkmate. She probably assumed that if Greg and my best friend developed feelings for each other, it would turn me into a mental case and then I'd slowly fade out of the picture. I can't believe Greg would do this to me, after all we've been through. Our marriage is too important to me to let it end this way, and after all, we do have a son together. I'm sure Lorraine's been spoon-feeding him awful lies about me but why would he believe them, turn around, and cheat on me? Christ, how far down does this rabbit hole actually go? Greg's transformation into the serpent he is now is going to take a lot of work to undo. He's always been somewhat of a punk but a sweet punk, my punk, and I'm willing to do all I can to right this wrong.

Shelly down at the market says I deserve better than Greg. I guess deep down I've always known this but let's face it, who else would take an interest in me? I don't have any decent education (everything I know now I learned on the streets), I'm not that pretty, and I can't even afford a gym membership. All the money I make goes to Brian and basic necessities. Lorraine doesn't pitch in financially like she used to, which is fine with me, because I don't need her fuckin' charity. The contractor Greg works for gave him a ten-cent raise a month ago (big deal) and then hired Lori a week later as his new secretary, which wasn't a cheap trick, unlike Lori. I heard through the grapevine that she's getting paid twice as much as Greg, which pissed me off like you wouldn't believe, but Greg didn't seem to care, he was content with her being on top.

I can't remember the last time I spent a fun night out with Greg or my friends. Greg has always been a night owl, that never upset me because he used to call and let me know where he was, which usually turned out to be with the guys. Now it seems the local hot spot is Lori's lair. How do I know? I have connections, and after countless times of trying to get him to confess where he ends up just about every night, he finally caved in when I threatened to kill myself. He claims all they do is talk about work and keeps repeating that they are just friends. Oh, yeah, then why do

you always come home with that stupid Cheshire cat grin on your face? (I've asked). Never a straight, honest answer, he just rolls his eyes and then screams at me over irrelevant things as usual. Shelly asked if I had approached Lori about my suspicions. I have, a million times, but like with Greg, I get nowhere.

I keep playing the scene out over and over again in my head. Greg and I having it out in the kitchen, no, maybe the living room, there are too many sharp objects in the kitchen, although he could easily throw me through the bay window if he really wanted to. He's never hurt me, physically, but at 6'3", 226 lbs, there's no telling what he'd do in a fit of rage. He'll definitely be home at a decent hour tonight because he and a buddy made plans to go to a hockey game tomorrow, which means he would need some rest. Brian's sleeping over at Lorraine's (at least it's for a good cause), so Greg and I will have the house to ourselves. I pray he'll just admit to being unfaithful so we can start the process of rebuilding our relationship.

It's 11:18 and I just caught a glimpse of Greg's headlights as he pulled into the driveway. My pulse rate was off the chart and with the amount of sweat pouring down my forehead, you'd swear I just ran a marathon. I could hear him whistling as he climbed the cellar stairs, funny, he only whistles when he comes from Lori's place. As he turned the doorknob, I took a deep breath and prayed for my safety.

"Hey, what are you still doing up," he asked as he stomped the snow off his Timberlands.

"We need to talk, Greg", I replied with hesitation. "Were you at Lori's tonight?" Dumb question.

"Yeah, the boss asked us to finish up some paperwork, you should've seen the pile we had to go through,"

"I thought you finished all that last night, Greg?"

"Christ, Alicia, I told you that the boss has got some really big projects coming up and very few workers to help out. Oh, and afterwards, I stopped by my mom's for dessert, she made Ruby Red Velvet cake, you know that's my favorite," he said with a smirk. I quickly turned my attention to the sparkling, salt-covered street, trying my hardest not to let him see my eyes swell.

"Why don't you love me anymore, Greg? Why don't you ever want to be with me and Brian?" I asked meekly, still looking out the window.

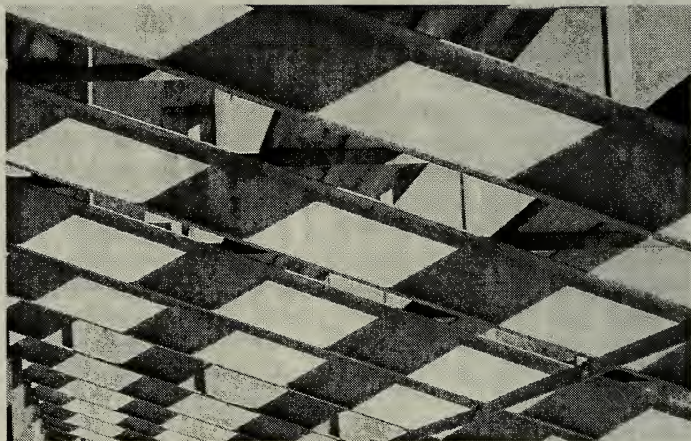
"It's just business. What do you want me to do? Be happy I have a job", he snapped as he tossed his keys and Orioles cap onto the counter.

"I just want things to go back to the way they once were. I think we should sit and work things out tonight, Greg." He shot me this quick glance as if I were annoying him, the way a child looks at his kid brother.

"Here we go again, huh, Alicia. You just never know when to leave shit alone, do you?" he mumbled angrily causing this one particular vein to protrude out of his neck. I could feel myself getting tense but I was not about to back down, not now, not ever again.

"Fine, Alicia, but let's make it quick okay, 'cause I'm beat," he barked over his shoulder as he washed his hands in the sink. As I moved in closer, I could hear him curse faintly (but sharply) through his clenched teeth as the hot, soapy water absorbed into his chapped hands. I backed up.

"Oh, by the way, straight from the game tomorrow, after I drop Pete off, I promised Lori I'd stop by and fix her busted dish washer, so I'll probably be home late," he announced as he slowly turned around while gingerly dabbing his hands with the dish towel, neglecting to make any kind of eye contact. At that moment I wondered if there was even the slightest chance I'd win back my husband's heart tonight. I had a feeling I was going to lose, I always lose.



**SHAWN SWEDBERG**

*Bleacher*

*Broken in Baltimore II:  
Beyond Repair*

I still can't believe I actually did it. God knows I fantasized about it a thousand times, but I never thought I had the balls to go through with it. It might not be so bad, though. So, I have to spend some time secluded from the outside world, big deal. For what it's worth, I'd rather be in here than still digesting that steady diet of bullshit I'd been choking down with for the past four years. Frankly, I had visions of a much harsher sentence. Forty, fifty years, for life? Mom promised she'd work her magic and as usual, she came through. I still don't know how she managed to get me a measly ten years but who cares, right. Point is, I lucked out. At least in here I'll get some peace and quiet for a change. No more, "Greg, we need to talk, Greg, where have you been? Greg, why don't you love me any more?" Jesus, how much is one man expected to take before he snaps? Like I said before, Alicia just never knew when to leave shit alone; too bad she had to learn the hard way, not unlike my father.

Ya wanna hear how I did it? It was a rather ingenious plan, if I do say so myself. Of course, mom helped but the whole thing was my idea. Don't worry, there wasn't a gun or knife involved, and I sure as hell didn't run her over with my car if that's what you're thinking. Yeah, like I'm really gonna fuck up the front end of my Mustang over the likes of Alicia. The sight of blood and guts makes me queasy; besides, mom said the less mess the better, so we took a more sophisticated route.

"You're gonna fix her busted dishwasher, huh? Is that the only reason why you'd be stopping by there so late, Greg? God, What the hell is wrong with you?"

I use to love getting Alicia all riled up. But I have to give her credit 'cause she was a lot smarter than she looked. I knew she knew there was something going on between Lori and me but she was too chicken to come right out and peg

me for an adulterer, so like any other guy in my position, I wasn't gonna stop.

"I don't get you, Greg. What's so special about Lori, anyway? You have family obligations here or has that bitch clouded your mind?" she sniffled as I sat and untied my damp boots.

"You know damn well what my son means to me. As for Lori, I like seeing her, spending time, and having fun with her. That's more than I can say for you. You're a total drag, babe," I blurted out as I got to my feet. "Relax, will ya! Go hang with the girls from work or something." I was about two inches away from her tear-soaked face when I shouted this. I was so pissed off, I felt like hurling the TV through the bay window, which would have been fitting 'cause Springer was on.

Maybe if she weren't such a controlling train wreck, I wouldn't have gone off on her like I did. She had this persistent way of irritating me, like a damn, oozy rash that just wouldn't disappear.

"I'm twenty-seven years old, Alicia. A grown man who can make his own decisions, okay! If you have a problem with who my friends are, tough shit"!

At that point, I was making my way up the stairs to shower and go to bed but Alicia wouldn't let it rest. I could tell she was about ready to pop and a part of me was excited to see it finally happen. On the other hand, I was too exhausted to deal with it so I told her to shut-up.

"No, I won't shut-up, Greg. Who the hell are you to do this to me? Turn around and look at me, you son of a bitch!" Out of the corner of my eye I saw her reach for the lamp on the coffee table, but I was too far up the stairs to wrestle it away. She threw it, hitting me in the right temple. Now it was on.

"Are you out of your damn mind?" I screamed, staggering down the stairs to the kitchen for a towel and ice. There was blood everywhere and the lamp broke into so many pieces, it looked like a piñata exploded. (Too bad 'cause my mom bought me that lamp to go with my Baltimore Orioles collection.)

"Admit it, Greg. You're having an affair, aren't you," she asked softly as I scrambled for the ice tray. She looked possessed. Her eyes were fixated on the trail of blood I had left and her whole body was shaking uncontrollably. I was afraid to let her out of my sight for fear she'd clobber me with the frying pan or something. As I applied cold pressure to my cut, I answered her question with a bold "yes".

“You asked, so I told. Now what, Alicia, huh? You should have seen this coming. All you care about is work and I’m sick of being put on the back burner. At least Lori gives me the attention I deserve.”

From there, Alicia backed up and ran upstairs. She slammed our bedroom door so hard, all of the pictures on the living room wall went crashing to the floor. Just more fuel added to my already potent headache.

Did I ever care about Alicia? Yeah, I guess at one time I did. When we first started going out, things were okay between us. But Alicia built it up to be something it definitely wasn’t. She use to tell people I was some kind of prince and that I did all kinds of romantic things for her like taking her places and buying her crap, stuff like that. Nope, not me, I’m no white knight. She must have been talking about someone else. Honestly, I was just looking for play.

After she got pregnant and talked me into marrying her, our relationship really went downhill. I guess I was just pissed at the thought of becoming a dad so young. Devoting the rest of your life to raising a kid at the age of twenty-three is nothing to take lightly. When I told my mom Alicia was pregnant, I thought she was gonna have a stroke. But surprisingly, she was more upset with Alicia than she was me. Mom tried to warn me long ago not to get mixed up with Alicia but I have to admit it, a part of me was strangely attracted to her. I think it was her sense humor that reeled me in. She was funny and enjoyed making people laugh. But that was the old Alicia. The Alicia of late was always bitchin’ and lying about something. She’d yell at me for being lazy, yet when I worked, she’d chew me out for never being around. But the number one reason I cheated on Alicia with Lori was because my mom said she caught Alicia coming out of Brad Anderson’s house one evening acting all suspicious-like. I approached her about it, but all Alicia said was that she was just returning something she had borrowed. After that, I dropped the whole thing but never forgot about it. I figured if she wants to mess around, fine, so will I. And who better to mess around with than Lori, her best friend. Mom was right, it did turn her into a psycho.

The next morning, I awoke on the pullout couch to Alicia standing over me with a steak knife ready to plunge it into my chest. I was still in that state of being half asleep and half awake but nothing gets ya up like the sight of your own

reflection in cold, sharp steel. Still lying on my back, I grabbed both of her wrists and twisted the knife away before she could do any harm. (Why she waited so long to attempt murdering me, I'll never understand). Once I had the knife in one hand, I took hold of Alicia's hair with the other and pressed the side of the tip into her neck. She was screaming like a five-year-old, but I still wasn't convinced I was getting through to her.

"You just made the biggest mistake of your life, babe. You should have killed me when you had the chance", I whispered through my teeth, still yanking on her brown locks. Just when I was about to do her in, the doorbell rang; it was mom with Brian.

"Hello, anyone home?" she shouted from the porch. I released Alicia and told her not to say a word and to go upstairs and clean herself up. (Yeah, like her mother-in-law would believe anything she had to say anyway). Before I opened the door, I slid the knife under the recliner and adjusted my bandage.

"Hey, Bry. Hey mom. How's my little guy this morning," I asked half-heartedly.

"We're fine, dear. Would you mind... Jesus, Gregory, what happened to your head?"

I didn't know what to say in front of Brian so I told her I bumped it on a beam in the attic.

"I'm fine, mom. It looks worse than it really is," I explained as she handed Brian and his backpack off to me.

"My poor baby. Let's go into the kitchen so I can clean it for you properly. Where's Alicia, still in bed?" she asked as she took hold of my torn shirt and led me to the table.

"No, she's upstairs, um, getting changed, I... think." She could tell there was something up but didn't ask any more questions with Brian in the room.

"Hey buddy, go watch some TV, okay," I said to Brian as mom picked at the bloodstained band-aid. As soon as I saw Brian flop onto the couch, I told her what happened.

"This is what you get when you don't listen to your mother. I told you she was no good, didn't I?" she snapped as she splashed peroxide onto my wound. (She always carried a little bottle of it in her purse in case of an emergency).

She was right. She's always right when it came to life issues. Damn Alicia for screwing things up.

"What should I do, mom. If I'm not careful, Alicia could blab this to one of her damn friends or even worse, the cops. They'll never believe my side of the story, what with the affair and all. This cut doesn't prove a damn thing, mom.

I'll get picked up for spousal abuse and lose Brian," I mumbled intensely as I peeled the dry skin from the backs on my hands.

"She's crazy, Gregory. I've been saying it since day one. You better put an end to this before Alicia fries your ass when you least expect it."

Then it hit me. I knew right then and there what I had to do to make sure the chaotic events that unfolded never left the house.

It had been exactly one month since Alicia had lost her mind that icy January night. It seemed like years since the last time I slept well, but I knew it would all be worth it in the end. I had picked a Friday night to wash my hands of Alicia once and for all. We had made up, sort of. Actually, it was just enough to keep her from telling on me. I wasn't about to go down without a fight.

I knew Alicia wouldn't be home until 9:30 and my boss had given me the whole day off, so I figured I'd better take advantage of my time alone and prepare for the upcoming extravaganza. My mom had already been clued in on the plan, all that was left was to tweak the "blueprint" here and there and run through the checklist one more time.

"Any questions, mom.? We only have one chance to get this right. There's no room for screw-ups," I whispered into the phone.

"I'll call you again right before I'm ready to leave." I was nervous, but mom did a good job of keeping me in line. Everything was set and ready to go. Mom had taken Brian to her bingo friend, Mrs. Peterson's condo downtown, so now all I had to do was wait for Alicia to come home.

10:02, she was late. No big deal. She's just delaying the inevitable, I thought. I had just dialed Lori's number on my cell phone, just to see what she was up to, when I heard Alicia open the garage door. I anxiously slipped my phone back into my shirt pocket and waited for her to open the cellar door.

"How come you're late?" I wondered out loud as she unzipped her coat.

"Jen went home sick so naturally, I had to stay late and pick up the slack. What do you care, anyway. I'm surprised Lori's not here keeping you company," she said with an attitude. I ignored it and moved right into my plan of action.

"You look tired, babe. Why don't you go upstairs and take a nice, relaxing bubble bath. You can use that new stuff I bought ya. Brian's with Mrs. Peterson 'cause I had to go out to the site to finish something. I just got home myself 'bout half-hour ago," I lied, trying my best to fake a persuasive smile.

"Yeah, fine. I'll be upstairs then. Why don't you go get Brian soon, I haven't seen him all day. I don't want to burden Mrs. Peterson," she muttered through a yawn.

Excellent. As soon as I heard her turn the radio on in the bathroom, I knew that was the perfect time to proceed. I crept up to the door and pressed my ear against it. She was listening to her favorite classical music CD, Beethoven or something, and I could hear weak splashing. I took a deep breath and opened the door.

"Can I get anything before I leave to get Brian, dear?" (Dear? That even shocked myself).

"No, I'm fine, thanks. Oh, maybe that magazine on the counter."

It was a *People Magazine* with a couple of battered women on the front cover. How appropriate, I thought.

When I turned around to grab the magazine, I saw Alicia's reflection in the mirror. She was looking down at the tiny bubbles that had collected under the faucet with that pathetic, depressed look on her face. I couldn't wait any longer. With my back still to Alicia, I picked up the radio and tossed it into the tub, causing the pink water to spew out onto the floor. I never looked directly at her but the sounds were enough to give you nightmares.

"That's what you get, you worthless bitch. If electrocuting you is what it takes to silence that obnoxious mouth of yours, so be it," I said looking down, clutching the mildew-covered counter.

When she finished flailing about, I took her out of the tub, dried her off, and dressed her in the same clothes she had on when she came home, nametag and all. (I also took the time to blow dry her hair). At that point, I realized I was halfway home to freedom.

As soon as I had cleaned up the mess in the bathroom, I carried Alicia's limp, warm body downstairs and laid her on the couch. With part one completed, I picked up the house phone and called mom so she could assist me with part two.

"It's done, mom. It's done. Meet me about two miles down the farm road, Alicia *always* takes it coming home, and make sure nobody follows you, got it?" I shouted into the receiver.

I wasn't about to panic and risk ruining everything, but I was a little shook up. I took a swig of something hard I found in the liquor cabinet, then headed down the cellar stairs with Alicia's body slung over my shoulder. I popped the trunk to her car and tossed her in. After that, I scrounged the garage for a tarp to cover her with, ya know, just in case I got pulled over, but could only come up with Brian's old Smurfs blanket. It was better than nothing, I thought. When I hopped into the Coupe, I took a minute or two to calm down. I zippered my Carhartt jacket and double-checked the center console for a pair of gloves. They'd be a snug fit, but would have to do.

The clock on the dash showed 10:45 when I arrived at the meeting place. Mom was already there, waiting with her lights off, but kept the engine running like I had asked. When I came to a stop, I quickly shifted into reverse and turned around to make it appear as if Alicia were on her way home. Then, I turned the lights off for the time being. In the distance, I noticed the rustic farmhouse lit up like a damn Christmas tree.

"You don't think any one will come by and see us, do you? What about the people who live in the farmhouse?" I asked as I stepped out of the Ford Escort, engine still rumbling. I was literally shaking in my boots.

"We have to act fast, Gregory, or you can kiss it all good-bye. That house is at least a mile away. Come on, I'll help you get the body into the front seat," she said as she flicked what remained of her cigarette to the frozen tundra. Simultaneously, we tightened our gloves and exhaled nervously, causing our visible breath to bellow out of our mouths, resembling a couple of wolves on the nightly prowl. Once Alicia's pale body was placed behind the wheel, mom fastened the seat belt and turned the headlights back on.

"Well, where is it, mom? Don't tell me you forgot the damn thing?"

"Of course not, sweetie. It's in my glove compartment."

As I made my way to the passenger side of my mom's Mazda, my mind started racing. What if we get caught? Who'll take care of Brian? My head was spinning with thoughts of being thrown in jail, forced to sleep next to a guy named "Big Leon." "No", I said, slapping myself across the face. It's better this way. No more nagging, no more bullshit.

"Hurry, Gregory. I hear plow trucks."

"I'm comin'. Get in the car mom, I'll be there in a minute." It was lighter than I expected it to be, smaller too. I

knelt down beside the steamy tail pipe and gently pushed the toy-size explosive inside. Forgetting to bring a flashlight, I was forced to work going by feel alone.

"That should do it," I thought as I rose to my feet and dusted the snow from my knees. I figured it would only be a matter of time before the hot metal would ignite the sensitive fuse and launch Alicia's corpse into space. And by the time the car did explode, me and mom were already back home, drinking cocoa with Brian.

One week later, I read in the paper that the authorities arrested Brad Anderson for murdering my wife.

Looking back on what I did, I have no regrets. It didn't pan out *exactly* the way I had hoped, but I really can't complain. My marriage wasn't worth the time and energy to patch, it was beyond repair. I knew it and I think deep down so did Alicia. Could I have gone a less drastic route? Sure, but at least now I know I'll never have to set eyes upon her again.

You're probably wondering how I got Brad to take the fall. Simple. Since Brad's the "hunky" neighborhood plumber and former lover of Alicia, I had mom break into his house one afternoon and steal a piece of PVC pipe, which already had his prints all over it. Then, she snuck into his shed and took a little bit of fertilizer, along with a couple other kinds of smelly chemicals Brad failed to label, mixed them all together and presto, she had the ingredients for a homemade ticker. After that, she dipped a long, thin piece of rope in turpentine and once it dried, she attached it to the end of the chemical-filled container and kept it hidden at the bottom of her linen closet until that night.

As it turned out, the cops found the remains of the pipe and container lying on top of a snow banking about a mile from where the car blew-up. (Damn, I wish I could have been there to see that car soar.) Anyway, when the cops asked me about Brad, I told them that I suspected he was having an affair with my wife. He denied it, but his fingerprints on the pipe sealed his fate, but only for a couple of days though, I have Lori to thank for that.

It was my fault, kinda. But it was Alicia who startled me and made me screw up. If she hadn't opened the garage door, I would have never panicked and forgotten to disconnect from Lori's number. Right before Alicia got in, I dialed Lori's house but never hung up. I slipped my cell phone back into my shirt pocket, and well, she ended up hearing everything that happened that night. Me calling

Alicia a worthless bitch and something about electrocuting her, but most of the details are foggy to me now. Long story short, she went to the police and told them what I had done, then she bitched me out and told me she hopes I burn in hell. That was fine with me 'cause I had had my fill of her anyway.

I was relieved that mom was somehow acquitted of the charges that were brought against her. The police said there just wasn't enough substantial evidence to incriminate her. Thank God, otherwise Brian would be in foster care even as we speak. Speaking of which, mom's visiting me today and she said she's going to bring Brian. It's been a while since I've seen him and even longer since I've held him. But on a much lighter note, I just got word this morning from one of my attorneys that mom was able to finagle something with the judge and I might get out as early as next year. I'm beginning to wonder if there isn't anything that woman can't do. I have a feeling I'm going to win, I always win.

*The Never-Ending Story*

The beginning or the end  
A quiet room filled with strangers  
The last dance of the first night  
Five minutes of icy air  
Three hours of subtitles  
An unexpected smile  
The alpha or the omega  
The story of a fallen soldier  
The distance between lovers  
A broken heart  
A research paper  
The moon or the sun.  
Yesterday. Tomorrow. Today.

*Deceived*

I fell in love with a Boy  
A Boy who didn't smell like a boy,  
didn't sound like a boy,  
didn't act like a Boy.

I had already birthed one boy to love.  
How could this be again?

I became impregnated  
with the love from this Boy,  
who I thought was a Man.

He said he would love me,  
respect me, care for me,  
The more we went through life,  
BOY is what he appeared to be.

The more I grew to love him,  
Boy is what he became.  
How did this happen?

How could this be?  
I went from one to three.

I started off with one,  
Fell in love with one,  
And was left with one  
inside of me...  
Alone.

## *Fate Steps In*

*There are two desks in the center of the stage, facing stage right, one behind the other. ANNE sits in the desk on the right, RYAN in the desk on the left. Backpacks sit next to the desks. ANNE is leaning on the desk, sitting cross-legged, reading. RYAN is stretched out in his chair, so his feet are under ANNE's chair. ANNE is oblivious to RYAN's speaking.*

**RYAN:** *(Shifting uncomfortably in his chair.)* Why are these desks always so damn uncomfortable? *(Finds a way to sit so his feet are resting carefully on the legs of ANNE's chair.)* All I want is a conversation. *(Pauses, thinking.)* It doesn't have to be anything important. A hello, a smile, that's all I want. I'd even settle for a "Get the hell out of my way." Anything.

*ANNE closes her book, packs up her bag, leaves stage left. She walks right past RYAN, who looks up at her. She doesn't see him.*

**RYAN:** *(Trying to sound confident.)* I'll tell her tomorrow. That will be the end of it. I can do this. *(Pauses.)* Or maybe I'll wait a few more days. *(Blackout.)*

*A sparse dorm room is set up, with a bed, a dresser, and a table lamp. RYAN and LAURA sit on the bed.*

**LAURA:** You have to let go of this. It's been two years, Ryan.

**RYAN:** *(Quietly.)* I know.

**LAURA:** Seriously, do you have any idea how many girls have asked me if you're single since the semester started?

**RYAN:** *(Dryly.)* An entire flock of girls.

**LAURA:** *(Ignoring his comment.)* What the hell am I supposed to say to them? "Yes, he is single, but he still

carries a major torch for this girl he never spoke to through all of high school, so I'll have to deny your application."

**RYAN:** Do you even realize how obnoxious you are?

**LAURA:** Yes. Yes I do. But if it weren't for me, you'd be completely anti-social, even more than you are already. You would never go anywhere. (*Growing melodramatic.*) You'd just lock yourself in your dorm room and write your sentimental crap about Anne, dearest Anne...

**RYAN:** That's it. I'm leaving.

**LAURA:** This is your room, hon.

**RYAN:** (*Flustered.*) Fine, I'm not leaving, but I am ending this conversation. Right now.

*Both are silent for a moment, looking around the room for something else to talk about. When LAURA speaks, she has softened.*

**LAURA:** I know this is hard for you, okay? But you have to get on with your life. Let's look at the facts of this situation: one, you have this obsession with Anne.

**RYAN:** That's a bit strong.

**LAURA:** Fine. Crush. Undying love. Whatever. (*Pauses, regains train of thought.*) Two, you never told her, and she never found out. Three, we all graduated with this kept a secret, and you haven't seen her since.

**RYAN:** Oversimplifying, but basically accurate.

**LAURA:** The question is, what do you plan to do about it? Obviously, you have to do something. You can't let this control you forever. It's not healthy.

**RYAN:** There isn't much I can do about it. I either have to find her, forget about her, or kill myself.

**LAURA:** Funny.

**RYAN:** You think I'm kidding.

**LAURA:** You did this to yourself. You know that, right?

**RYAN:** *(Quietly.)* I know. *(Blackout.)*

*The stage is bare. ANNE stands downstage center, wearing a blue prom dress. The lights on her are also blue. She is looking around as if she is waiting for someone. RYAN appears from stage left, walks downstage to meet her. He is wearing a suit and tie. He looks rushed.*

**RYAN:** Thank you so much for meeting me here. *(ANNE nods but does not say anything.)* I've had all of this built up inside for so long, and I've tried to tell you so many times, but I could never get the words out. *(Pauses, waiting for her to respond, continues when he realizes she isn't going to.)* You probably don't have any clue who I am, but I've known you since we started high school. We were together in a class or two each year, and I always sat behind you so I could look at you. Wait, that came out wrong. Dammit. I don't mean to sound like such a stalker. *(ANNE raises her eyebrows.)* I mean, I'm not stalking you, if that's what this sounds like. I just... I've always felt that you were this really kind, insightful person that no one ever took the time to notice. Every time you'd say something in class, it was always so well thought out, and no one ever responded or cared. I did. I always did. And when I got to hear you read stories you'd written... they were beautiful. You're really a wonderful writer, and I can't believe you didn't get any recognition for it. *(ANNE smiles slightly.)* A few times I tried to talk to you after class, but you were always walking away and didn't hear me. After a while, I stopped trying, and it just got more and more impossible as time went on. Eventually, even the thought of trying to talk to you made me feel ill. I built up this wall around you, and it grew and grew until it consumed you entirely, until you weren't even a person anymore, just this fear in my own mind. *(Pauses.)* And then we graduated. That was when I really lost it. I had never actually gotten up the courage to talk to you, but at least when we were in school together I could convince myself that it was okay because I always had tomorrow to try again. When I didn't have that anymore, when it finally set in that I had screwed up all those chances, I couldn't take it. That's when I really started obsessing over you. I mean... bad choice of words. I'm sorry. You probably think I'm a psychotic stalker or something. *(ANNE shakes her head, makes a motion with her hand for him to continue.)* Anyway... after we graduated, I sort of stopped thinking of you as a person, and more as this legend I'd created. Because I didn't really know you, I

filled in the details myself. I put you on this pedestal, I made you out to be this perfect person, this ideal. I wouldn't even consider dating anyone else, because they could never live up to the image I had of you. It consumed me.

*ANNE looks at him for a moment with sympathy and understanding, but suddenly looks down at an invisible wristwatch, and starts walking backward toward stage right.*

**RYAN:** No! Come back! I'm sorry!

*ANNE raises her arms in a shrug, as if she has to leave and can't do anything about it, continues walking and disappears off stage. RYAN is left alone, staring at the point off stage where ANNE left. Blackout.*

*The same dorm room is set up on stage. RYAN sits on the end of the bed, studying his hands. LAURA is sitting on the floor, holding a mirror in one hand and applying eye shadow with the other.*

**RYAN:** *(Quietly, sadly, still looking down at his hands.)* I had the dream again.

**LAURA:** *(Annoyed.)* Here we go.

**RYAN:** This time, I told her everything.

**LAURA:** *(Very sarcastic.)* Good for you. I'm thrilled that you finally told her all of the shit you've been burdening me with. Oh wait, you were just dreaming again.

**RYAN:** *(Passively.)* Go to hell. *(Continuing his story.)* It was going really well... except that she couldn't speak.

**LAURA:** *(Distracted.)* Isn't it like that every time?

**RYAN:** Well, yeah... but this was different. Usually she doesn't seem to hear me, but this time she was nodding and smiling at what I was saying.

**LAURA:** I guess that's a step in the right direction.

**RYAN:** But here's the terrible part: so I finish telling her everything, and she looks like she understands. Then all of a sudden she's looking at her wrist like there's a watch there

and walking backwards away from me, and then she's gone. And I'm thinking, did I say something wrong? Did I scare her off?

**LAURA:** If you told her half of the things you've said to me, I would hope she'd be scared off.

**RYAN:** (*Dryly.*) Thanks. But seriously, isn't that weird?

**LAURA:** I guess so. But it really doesn't sound much different than all the other dreams you've had about her, except that she sort of responded this time. Sort of.

**RYAN:** (*Hopeful.*) So I shouldn't think too much of it?

**LAURA:** No, not really. Don't get your hopes up again. The next time you see her will probably be at some reunion, and you'll be married and won't be able to remember why you were so obsessed with her.

**RYAN:** We can only hope I'd ever be so well adjusted. (*Blackout.*)

*There are a couch and a couple of chairs on stage. People are milling around at a party, some sitting, some standing, many holding drinks. Everyone is in a costume, some in Halloween-type costumes, some just wearing feathered masks. There is a pile of their masks on the floor next to the couch. RYAN and LAURA enter from stage left. LAURA is dressed as a flapper, RYAN is wearing normal clothes.*

**RYAN:** (*To LAURA.*) Why are we even here? This is stupid. I don't know why I let you talk me into these things.

**LAURA:** Because you need to get out more. Deal with it. And by the way, I told you everyone would be dressed up.

**RYAN:** Fine, you were right about that. I wonder if these masks are free. (*Picks one up, puts it on.*)

**LAURA:** Much better. Don't you feel less out of place now?

**RYAN:** I guess so. But I still hate these parties. (*While he is saying this, LAURA slips away into a crowd of people, RYAN looks around for her and realizes she is gone.*) Great. Thanks a lot. (*Sighs.*)

*RYAN wanders around awkwardly for a few moments, until a girl wearing one of the feathered masks approaches him shyly.*

**GIRL:** (*Quietly.*) Hello.

**RYAN:** Hey there. Uh... how's it going?

**GIRL:** Could be worse, I guess. You?

**RYAN:** About the same. So... what brings you here? To the party, I mean.

**GIRL:** One of my loving, caring friends dragged me here, even though I don't really like parties. I thought you looked miserable, too, so I figured maybe we could be miserable together.

**RYAN:** (*Laughs.*) You're observant. I am feeling pretty awkward. It's like being in high school all over again.

**GIRL:** Tell me about it. It's like you expect people to have changed since then, when the only real difference is there's more alcohol to go around.

**RYAN:** Exactly. I never really went to any parties in high school, and I wasn't intending to start now, but I was dragged here, too. And then the friend who did the dragging mysteriously disappeared. (*Bitterly.*) She means well enough, but she has some obnoxious tendencies. Like telling me how to live my life. (*Realizes how much he's said.*) Ah... sorry.

**GIRL:** What for?

**RYAN:** Giving too much information. Burdening you with my problems when I've just met you.

**GIRL:** Don't worry about it. It takes my mind off my own. So what does she do, exactly?

**RYAN:** Oh, Laura? There's just no room in her world for being sentimental. And I'm the most sentimental guy ever, in the history of the world. It bothers her, and she insists on nagging me about it all the time. Like that's going to change the way I've always been.

**GIRL:** (*Nods in agreement.*) That's too bad. It's hard to stand up to people sometimes.

**RYAN:** Yeah, it is.

**GIRL:** (*Cautiously.*) So how is it that you've earned the title of Most Sentimental Guy Ever, if you don't mind my asking?

**RYAN:** (*A bit stunned, not sure how to answer her question.*) Well... there was this... girl. I guess you could say I had a crush on her, even though that doesn't really describe it. It was horrible, and consuming. And it lasted through all of high school, and the past two years since then. (*Afraid he's going into too much detail, finishes quickly.*) Anyway, I never told her, and then we graduated. And Laura knows about all of this, and thinks I should just get over it and move on. But it's not that simple.

**GIRL:** That's tough. You usually can't just "get over" things like that. Do you think that if you had another chance, you'd tell her everything you just told me?

**RYAN:** I'd like to say I would, but I'm not sure I'd ever be able to. It's too frightening.

**GIRL:** Well, I hope you get the chance to tell her how you feel someday. For your sake.

**RYAN:** (*There is an awkward pause in the conversation, both look at the floor.*) Well... I should probably go find Laura before she gets too drunk.

**GIRL:** (*Reluctantly.*) Okay. I guess I'll... see you around. Good luck with everything.

**RYAN:** Good luck navigating the party. (*Starts to walk away.*)

**GIRL:** (*Calling him back.*) Actually, hold on a second. (*RYAN stops walking, turns to face her.*) You seem familiar somehow. I think I've met you before.

**RYAN:** Really? Hmm... I'm not sure. I can't see what you look like under that mask.

*Both take off their masks, and then look at each other. The girl is revealed as actually being ANNE. RYAN is completely stunned.*

**ANNE:** Ah, I remember now! You went to Lakeview, right?

**RYAN:** *(Slowly, very confused.)* Yes... yes, I did go to Lakeview. Wow. Um... I'm Ryan.

**ANNE:** Anne, nice to actually meet you. *(Extends a hand, RYAN shakes it slowly.)*

**RYAN:** *(Still in shock.)* Nice to actually meet you, too.

**ANNE:** I mean, I've met you before, but you know how it was at school. You never really knew anyone in your classes.

**RYAN:** Yeah, you could say that.

**ANNE:** It's kind of loud in here. Want to go someplace quieter to reminisce? Maybe get some coffee?

**RYAN:** Sure, that would be great.

**ANNE:** Maybe you can tell me more about this girl. I can help you get up the nerve to talk to her! *(Pauses, thinking.)* Wait, we went to the same high school. I wonder if I know her already.

**RYAN:** You might, actually.

*RYAN and ANNE leave together. RYAN is trying to keep himself from grinning as they walk off stage left. Blackout.*

*A Message from Me to You*

Tis' the poets who say, to thine own self be true

And so this message from me to you

Don't do as I do or as I say

Do what you feel, do what you may

I cannot tell you which way to go

I cannot tell you, I do not know

I wish you the best

I wish you well on your next test

Good luck and farewell

Be healthy, be well

But, remember this

When all is bliss

To thine known self be true

And thus this message from me to you.

## *She Stood*

A group of onlookers watched in the harsh January cold, a woman said goodbye to her eldest son. All eyes were on the little family bracing against the bitter onslaught. My heart wrenched in anguish remembering my conversation with Kathy just two days earlier. "Hug your babies, and love them like there won't be a tomorrow" she had demanded. "Kiss that boy, tell him you love him. I keep remembering all those kisses, warm and soft against my cheek. Matthew's fat hand in mine, of his blanket... I'll have to find his baby blanket... to go in the casket." Her voice broke off, choking back the sobs.

The night before, I had received the call that her twenty-year-old son, Matthew, had died. He had been on his way to work, driving down the highway, and he died. No long illness, no fiery crash, just a gentle slide to the shoulder and he was gone. Our small community of faith gathered to pray and offer help and support, knowing full well that there was nothing that could be done. He was gone. His place at the table would be empty forever. The horror of loss and grief overwhelmed each onlooker as the reality of the graveyard pierced our hearts like the cold winter wind penetrated our thick layers of clothing.

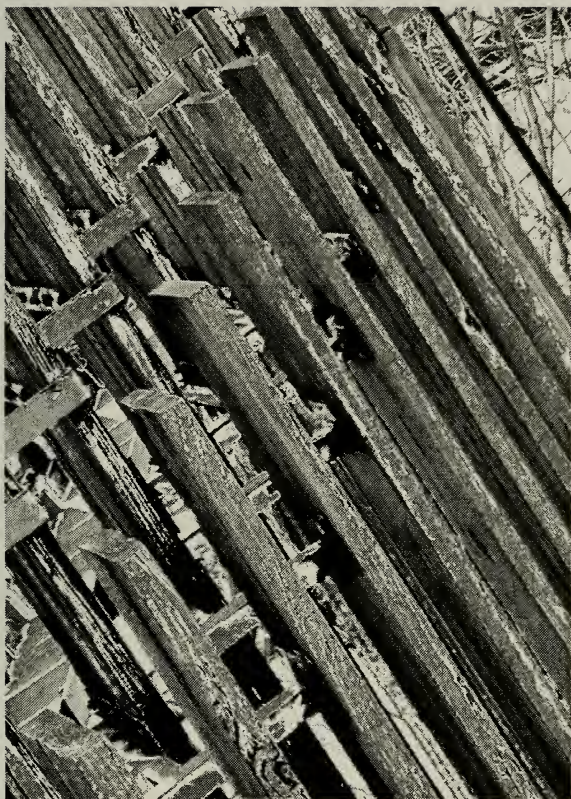
I stood in the cold, watching, hoping to see some solace for Kathy, wanting to know that you could live through this kind of pain, hoping that you couldn't, knowing that she had to. A ball of fear began to form in the pit of my stomach, realizing that she would have to leave him. The baby blanket that had warmed his rosy cheeks as a boy would offer no comfort in this place. The cold whirled around me as an internal cold raged within; she couldn't leave him here in this place. I couldn't go away from here and just leave him here. She couldn't do it. I couldn't watch her.

"Let us end with the prayer Jesus taught us to pray... Our Father." I heard out of the fierce gale in my heart. "Oh Father, we can't leave him," my heart cried. "And deliver us from evil," the little cluster ended with a solemn "Amen." The sky was gray and menacing, threatening to lash out at the little group. The Pastor towered above the family

offering some shelter from the assault. He waited, we all waited, I held my breath not knowing what would happen.

Suddenly the wailing and weeping of other cultures made so much more sense than our staid New England reserve. My heart screamed, "No! Stop! Wait! This is someone's baby!" She carried him inside her, feeling him kick and roll in the fullness of pregnancy. She had held him close in her arms, rocking and touching his soft cheek as he slept, savoring the perfume of a warm baby fresh from the bath. She had kissed boo boos, and enjoyed the discoveries of childhood; dandelion bouquets, quiet walks and blueberry days. She had walked with him through adolescence, hoping, watching and praying. She had watched him become a man, independent and resourceful waking up to his own potential. She couldn't just leave him here. We couldn't just walk away. He had lived and now he was gone, my heart broke as I watched and cried.

Slowly she stood, offering her support to her husband who sobbed with wrenching honesty. She stood and helped him to the car, watching over her sons to make sure they were all right. She stood with grace and dignity under a weight we knew would kill us. She stood with humility. She stood and walked on with a hole in her soul that would never be filled, but she stood, and so did we.



**VILAYPHET KRUOCH**

*Bleachers*

*The Eternal Fight*

The gritty sand  
Underfoot  
The soft lapping tug  
Of water  
Birds flying  
Overhead

A wild untamed sense  
Of peace  
A strange freedom  
Where brutality rules  
The strong survive  
The weak die

Only here does it come together  
To love and to be loved  
To win and to lose  
On a small strip of land

*Open Your Soul and Be Free*

Take a walk  
speak in whispers  
live with love in your heart  
display your angry beast  
give yourself a voice  
let the unknown unravel  
dare to be different  
open your soul and be free

*Questions That Run Wild*

What do you think about two people in love?  
Do you believe it is love or lust?

Who do you admire?  
Who do you trust?

I ask you this and that  
Why, you may ask  
Because these are questions that run wild

Do you believe that your lover loves you?  
Can you see it or feel it?

Do you believe his is true?  
Or do you see nothing and feel like shit?

I ask you this and that  
Why, you ask  
Because these are the questions that run wild

Do you push him away?  
Not wanting to believe him  
Do you seem to keep yourself astray?  
Do you truly believe in yourself and doubt him

I ask you this and that  
So What do you think of it  
And these questions that run wild?

*Night Song*

The night sings loudly  
With crickets and owls near  
The dawn will come soon

*Forrest*

August 10<sup>th</sup>  
They found you suspended  
High up in the air  
Like an angel  
Descending from the heavens

It was on the third day  
They found you  
Just like when  
Jesus had risen  
But you did not rise together

Three days  
In the august heat  
Like being in the desert  
With the vultures  
Circling overhead

Your body decaying  
In the internal heat  
The smell  
So overwhelming  
That Satan didn't even

Save you a seat...

For my brother Forrest –  
At the age of 20  
Took his own life  
By hanging

*The Closet*

As I sit in the darkness,  
Tears running down my face,  
I feel these four walls around me,  
Just taking all the space.

I know you're on the other side...  
With a grin upon your face

Knowing that I'm locked inside...  
This doesn't mean I'm Safe

No one here to save me,  
While you're tapping on the door,  
Sweat runs off my body,  
And drops upon the floor

I can see the doorknob turning...  
As the light falls upon my face

I know you're going to hurt me...  
Secrets and more pain to hide disgrace

Is it over?  
I pray that there will be no more,  
But once again the darkness,  
And the knocking on the door.

## *Touching Hands*

To see the sun and to be able to touch the leaves, grass, and the soil of  
Mother Earth, is to wonder how beauty exists.

The mountains smell of fresh air, being able to touch rain when it falls  
gently across your brow, and to listen to hear the drops fall in the mud  
sounds like steaks broiling on an open pit. To touch the wetness of rain,  
and to feel the mud sliding through the palm of hands making stains,  
leaving the skin dark, and crackling when it dries.

To hear the laughter of children and splashing in the puddles, making  
noises and leaving huge stains in the carpet of houses.

Touching Hands of human kindness, making things know how welcome  
they are, feeling the joy of a touch on a shoulder, and the touch of a hand  
on one's back.

Kindness of friendship, lovingness and the worthwhile of being alive bring  
joy and sadness to oneself.

Touching Hands, anywhere there's a soft or hard place that is around you;  
the joy of a newborn baby, and the softness of one's skin, and to be able to  
touch life. Yet, death is also a touch of life. One must leave this  
complicated world to bring in new life. Touching Hands of this life will  
continue to grow. Grow? What growth and why? This has been asked so  
many times before, and still there is an empty answer. Why is there life  
and death? Touching Hands cannot always help to simplify these  
complications. Touching Hands have only one purpose and that is to  
touch life before there's a touch of death.

Touching Hands would make you understand. Why ask too many  
questions? Touching Hands will always be around even when we no  
longer exist.

Touching Hands of life and beauty is the work of family, friendship, and  
love.

Touching Hands I thank you.



**AMANDA HOWARD**

*Tractor Seat*

*The Odyssey of DJ*

*(an excerpt from a novel-in-progress)*

I look out the window at the scenery rushing past at 65 mph, a bit out of anxiety, a bit out of admiration of the mountains and river I've never seen before, and a bit out of not wanting to look directly at the girl sitting across from me.

Let me introduce myself. My name is DJ, or my nickname is anyway. I'm 18 years old. I'm a freshman in college—or I was, anyway. I'm on summer vacation. Specifically, it's Labor Day weekend. When I'm in school, I'm either in math, science, or wish I were. Out of school, I'm a computer guy. You should see my games collection. But I'm getting off track. As long as I'm doing introductions, I should acquaint you with these people I find myself traveling with.

Sitting next to me is a good friend of mine for three years now. He has red hair, a letter jacket from track, and his real name is J-something, but ever since 10<sup>th</sup> grade when he was kicked out of wood shop for building one, he's been known only as Catapult. I've seen his catapult, by the way, and it's a lot like him; pretty cool, spends most of its time at his house, and it's fast, but doesn't look that dangerous. Under his jacket, he's got a cargo vest packed with every arcane outdoor equipment he could get his hands on, including a pocket flashlight, a collapsible all-purpose eating utensil, and a bunch of other stuff he'd been eager to show me earlier while the two of us pretended I was listening.

The girl across from me that I mentioned also has a nickname, as does everyone in the group, by some odd coincidence. She goes by K, and that's all I know about her at present. She's about 5'6" and thin, with a blonde ponytail, a hooded sweatshirt, jeans, and too much makeup. Draw your own conclusions here; I've none to offer you.

Next to her and across from Catapult is Braids, named for her head full of three-foot-long brown cords that look like they've been growing like kudzu for years. She's wearing pretty much the same kind of clothing as K, but darker hair, less eye shadow, and not quite as thin. Her I'm on better

terms with than K, we were in a history class together. She spends a lot of her free time twisting her braids between her fingers, as though she's obsessed with them or something. She claims to have 100 of them, and it looks like she just might. Rumors say that she's never cut her hair in her life. She also plays soccer, and I've seen her working at a small-town restaurant as a greeter, the one who stands behind the desk and takes reservations and stuff.

Braids, K, Catapult, and I are in the back of a VW Vanagon, the boys in the back bench seat and the girls in the seats behind the front seats, facing backwards relative to the car. In the front passenger seat is another guy I've known for a while, Ashes. Taking his nickname from an incident with a toaster oven from his early childhood, he's not usually outgoing, but he's nice enough to you if you approach him, I think. I've only briefly heard of him, really, but that's what Catapult told me. Strangely enough, he was the one who convinced Catapult and I to come on this trip in the first place.

And last, but not least, is the driver, who goes by Ryder. I think it's her last name. She may well be the most crucial of the six of us, because she knows how to get where we're going. She's the only one who's been on trips like these before. Rumor is she's done a whole lot of this sort of thing. The canteen around her neck confirms this.

We're on our way up to Maine for a long weekend of what Ryder calls "canoe-camping". The theory is, we spend three or four days riding canoes down a river, and camping, and there's a plane...

"Run through it one more time, what's going to happen here exactly?" I ask.

"Mmrf, wrhrgonn..." Ryder begins, but her mouth is full of trail mix.

"Hey, pass that back here! I never got lunch," Braids interjects.

"DJ," Ashes answers me as he hands Braids the gallon bag of trail mix. "We're going to be flown in via a small plane to Lobster Lake. That's the only way to get there, because it's nothing but woods up there. Then we canoe upstream, and spend the nights at pre-prepared campsites. That's what my family did four years ago, anyway."

"You got it exactly. There's a private airport up there that'll rent us canoes. The pilot knows me," Ryder added with a grin.

"When should we be arriving?" Braids asked, passing the trail mix around. Catapult and I each took a big handful; K just took a pretzel.

"About eleven. It's a long drive."

"It's only two now," said Catapult, "will we at least stop somewhere to grab dinner, or is it just trail mix the whole way?"

"Oh, we'll definitely stop; I won't make it without a full stomach. We'll have a lot of exercise this weekend, so if anyone's on a diet, then now would be the time to break it."

"So, we'll be driving for nine hours?" K asks. She turns to us in the back. "Well, I guess we better get to know each other now."

The sun is starting to set behind the immense girders of the bridge across the river between New Hampshire and Maine. It's almost seven o'clock, and my behind is falling asleep. But I'm not going to mention it in mixed company. Just raised well, I guess. The four of us in the back have been playing cards for almost an hour and having fun with it, but even though the ice has been broken, there still seems to be a slight male/female schism in the back of this van. I've moved to the center seat in the back, closer to Catapult (and the fold-out table) and K and Braids keep whispering to each other and giggling. Ashes and Ryder have barely said anything, except when Ryder told us she wanted to stop at the outdoor store an hour back for some things. That's been the only stop we've made in five hours. That place has some really good hats, most of which looked good on me, but I hadn't had my wallet on me. Ryder bought mostly camping food, which went into the trunk with what looked like more camping food. I can guess why she said that now would be the time to break a diet; there were at least a dozen chocolate bars in there. Ashes has been working the CD player the whole trip. For now, I suppose that makes him DJ. He's put in some good music, a lot of which I'm surprisingly not familiar with. The four of us in the back have been playing cards for the most part, and I showed the girls my card tricks (Catapult has seen them already). K liked them, Braids keeps pestering me with guesses about how they work. Magicians hate that.

"Hey, Ryder, this trail mix is making me hungry for some real food..."

"Sure thing, Catapult. There's an exit about 15 minutes from here, we'll stop and get dinner to go."

"What kind of restaurants are there?"

"The sign says Wendy's, McDonald's, and Arby's. Wendy's has the best food and the lowest prices, so we

should probably get dinner there. Also, we've still got a lot of driving to do, so we'll just eat in the car, okay?"

Everybody agrees to eating in the car (the back has a table and cup holders) but K presents another snafu.

"McDonald's has the only fries I'll eat."

"What's wrong with Wendy's fries?"

"They don't taste right, and they give me indigestion. But everything else at McDonald's is awful..."

"Look, K, McD's and Wendy's are right across the street from one another; why not just run over while we're in Wendy's and get some fries?" Catapult suggests.

"Yeah," Braids adds, "I'll order you a burger or something at Wendy's."

"You mean go alone?" The look on K's face implies that she isn't comfortable going alone.

"Geez, K, would you like some cheese with your whine?" Ashes seems impatient. And hungry. I can't argue, either. If this is our group's idea of teamwork, I can just picture our canoe dashed on the rocks and us turning to survival techniques commonly associated with the Donner Party. This is exactly why I don't go on road trips.

"Oh, for the sake of...DJ, will you please escort scaredy-K across the street so she can have fries?"

Who, me? I was being spoken to? What brought that on? "Uhh, sure, I might as well..." Before K and I leave, I whisper to Catapult, "Hey, can you order me some chicken things? I hate McDonald's burgers."

"What chicken things?"

"C'mon, man, is there a difference?"

"DJ, hurry up! I don't want to make His Majesty Ashes wait any longer." There appears to be some tension between two of our comrades.

"On my way." Crossing the street, K tugs at my sleeve and asks me...

"DJ, you don't think I'm being a pain, do you?"

"Well, I'm not sure I'd say that, but after this little episode, you might want to order extra-large fries so everyone thinks it was worth the effort."

After finally getting dinner for six and getting back on the road, the last rays of twilight have faded and we in the back are eating by fluorescent light. K looks overwhelmed as she tries to finish her fries (she ended up getting an extra-large order after all) and my heart is still trying to overcome the tension from when a large man in the McDonald's tried to hit on K, and she reacted by grabbing my arm and

pretending I was her boyfriend. That guy might have beaten me up! I don't usually go on big road trips like this, and this is why. But I'm safe; it's over now. Catapult is just finishing up his cheeseburger, and Braids is drinking a soda with one hand and twirling her hair around with her other hand. Now that I think of it, she's been fidgeting with her hair ever since we first set out from Cambridge. I'm beginning to think that perhaps she's a bit obsessed with her locks; otherwise why would she have so many braids instead of the usual one or two? And why grow them all out so low? Even now, they're pouring out of her seat and wrapping around things like so many snakes. If they get any longer, they'll drag on the ground as she walks. I'm now wondering if this will be a hindrance on our trip. Suddenly, an image flashes through my mind. The six of us are hiking through the woods, and Braids is unable to free her hair from two or three trees along the path. I can just see her braids hanging from branches like a spider's web, holding her fast.

"DJ, what's so funny?" Braids pulls me from my reverie.

"Huh? What? Nothing."

"Then stop looking at me like that. Hey, Ryder, how much longer until we get to the campsite?"

"I'd say about two hours." Ryder takes a sip from her canteen.

"Hey, can I get a sip of that?" Ashes asks.

"Sure."

Suddenly Catapult looks like he just had ice put down his shirt. "Oh, man, I just thought of something! DJ, you said we'd share your tent, right?"

"Yeah, Catapult, we went out and bought one big enough, remember?"

"Right, but did you take it out of the bag yet?"

"No."

"Well then, we're going to have to pitch a tent we've never seen before in total darkness!"

In my head, I'm kicking myself. Hard.

"Well, we saw the picture."

"Yeah, but we don't know about the slots, the poles, nothing!"

"I see what you mean." This is why I don't do road trips.

Somehow, I made it through the night okay, but not happily. I'm sure we pitched the tent wrong, because I can feel every bump in the ground. Or maybe it's because we're

on top of a driveway. Catapult has been snoring for a while, and it feels like the tent flap is open because it's either about 30 degrees out, or there's wind blowing in here. Of course, it is Maine, but then it also is summer...

A softer glow is starting to replace the streetlight outside the patch of clear plastic we assumed was the tent's window. Is the sun rising? I can't tell, I'm in that semi-sleep state where I could or could not be dreaming, and I'm only dimly aware that I should be more deeply asleep than I am. *Am I asleep?* Have I even slept at all?

Some time passes. I have no idea how much. Could be anywhere from five minutes to an hour and a half. Somehow, I realize that it's time to get up. I sit up, and notice that Catapult is just outside the tent, putting a clean shirt on. I must be groggy if I didn't hear him get up.

Now, I am awake. I should've gotten more rest, but at least now I'm as self-aware as I ever get. I reach for my clothes bag, which has been at the foot of the tent all night. I had no idea how cold it would get. I pull on the first long-sleeve shirt I can find, along with a pair of warm pants and fresh socks. I look up. The light can be seen coming in through the translucent rain cover. It is sunlight, but not much. Judging by how tired and cold I am, I'd say the sun is still very low in the sky. Maybe that means it'll get warmer later. I can only hope. Outside, I can hear a stirring. The birds are chirping over across the way. No, wait, that's K and Braids chatting. Somewhere in the other direction, I hear the sound of a zipper and the rustle of tent canvas. Must be Ashes putting away his tent. If he's already doing that, he must have been up for at least a half an hour before me. I reach up to the mesh pocket in the tent ceiling where I put my watch. It's about 6:30 a.m.

"Hey DJ. How'd you sleep?" Catapult leans over to look inside the 3 1/2 foot tall tent.

"I don't have a clue," I look at him with blank eyes. "What're we doing now?"

"Come out here so we can fold up the tent and pack up our sleeping bags."

"Okay. Hey, when did you get up?"

"When you elbowed me in the face. I assume you were asleep?"

"I have no idea."

"What do you mean you have no idea?"

"I mean I never truly 'fell asleep'. I went through the night in a state of semi-aware catatonia that could have been anything from intense boredom to a dream about lying in this tent. I lost all sense of time; for all I know, we could

have pitched this tent only an hour ago. All I know is I'm awake now, but my body isn't happy about it," I clamber out of the tent and stretch my legs which still feel stiff from the 11-hour car ride. My eyes are still heavy from fatigue. "What's everyone else doing?"

"Well, Ryder's been prodding me to get all my stuff out on the pier, Ashes is in the process of doing just that, and K and Braids are, well..." He shakes his head towards their tent, from which their soft voices are chirping unintelligible chatter mixed with giggling and sounds of zippers.

Now that I've got my head out the tent flap, I can now see for the first time exactly what my surroundings are, in daylight. The ground below us is a gravel parking lot, about big enough to hold half a dozen cars. The girls' and our tent are blocking incoming traffic, or would be if there were any. Next to the lot, there's a brown building that doesn't look much bigger than a bus, with a sign on the roof saying something about an airport and canoe rentals. In front of the building there's a metal rack with three or four canoes on it. The building and its lot are on the shore of a lake with a large dock. And on the dock are a small plane no longer than 35 feet, and a large pile of what seems to be our gear. The horizon.... isn't even visible; it's obscured by a thick layer of trees in every direction. I suppose that's the horizon then. A chill wind blows down my collar; a strange sensation to feel in August.

I lumber out of the tent, my legs still stiff from sleep, or lack thereof, and look around. Over to the left, Ashes is carrying a large bag out of the back of Ryder's VW. I stretch my arms out as far as possible, and my hand bumps something.

"Hey! Watch it there, DJ." I hadn't noticed Ryder standing just to my right, and have mistakenly punched her in the chest. "You finally wake up? Well, c'mon, and get your stuff packed up and on the pier."

"Was she there the whole time?" I whisper to Catapult after she walks away.

"Yeah, she was going to help take the tent down until she saw you were still asleep."

I'm not sure how comfortable I am with this Ryder girl. Put yourself in my place; how would you feel if you "woke up" and discovered a girl you barely knew had watched you sleep? Or if a girl you barely knew was telling you what to do with a sleeping bag you had just slept in? Or if you were out in the middle of nowhere, and a girl you barely knew was the only one that knew the way back to

civilization? I'm going to have to be very careful not to offend her, and yet I get the feeling I already have.

I stretch again, and as my blood starts flowing, I become more aware of the cold.

"What's the temperature, anyway? I was cold all night."

"Yeah, I noticed that, too, but we're in Maine. Ryder said it would get warmer as the sun got higher in the sky."

Already the pecking order has been established.

Ryder's experience makes her the leader, with Ashes running second in command, I believe. I can only wonder where the rest of us stand.

Well, somehow we managed to get everything packed up and on the pier, and five of us in the plane. The plane only had six seats including the one for the pilot, so Catapult volunteered to stay behind. Now, the rest of us are disembarking onto the shore of the lake we'll be canoeing on. K and Braids are drawing pictures in the part of the sand that just borders the water with their heels. Ashes found a big log on the shore that he's now using as a bench or a table on which to... rummage through his bag, it seems, while Ryder explains how the pilot circumvents the local ordinance about taking passengers and cargo at the same time.

"... so he takes the five of us first..."

I'm not that interested yet. Or awake, for that matter. I sit down on the sand and watch the small biplane lift off, slowly fading into the perfectly blue sky, over the trees, past the great mountain we all oohed and aahed and took pictures at as we flew by. I wonder if Catapult will feel the same way with nobody he knows to say things like 'look at that!' to. I also wonder about breakfast. Last night, I was too preoccupied with the tent and too engrossed in the novelty of being in a dark parking lot trying to sleep to give any thought to what would happen tomorrow. I know what you're thinking, I should be more Promethean if I'm going to throw caution to the winds like this, but keep in mind I'm inexperienced at this. Besides, I think K, Braids, and Catapult have been similarly shortsighted, but something tells me that Ashes and Ryder were on top of things. I decide to look at what K and Braids have been drawing.

"Hey, what'cha makin' there?" I look over K's shoulder.

"Oh, nothing, really; we're just fooling around." Indeed that's what it looks like; all I can discern are squiggly lines, and a heart superscribing initials I can barely read,

much less recognize since nobody on this expedition is going by their real name. Suddenly, I look up to notice that K and Braids have abandoned their doodles and have crowded around the log bench where Ashes is sitting.

"Hey, DJ, you want some coffee cake?"

Immediately I follow suit. Apparently, Ashes was rummaging in his backpack for the box of coffee cake he'd brought for all our breakfast. I gratefully take a piece in my hand and try to eat it while dropping as few crumbs as possible, not because I don't want to make a mess of the beach, but because I'm hungry and every crumb dropped is a crumb I can't eat. Once I finish the coffee cake, I notice K and Braids have wandered off down the shore.

"DJ, why don't you follow the girls, see what you can find?" Ashes suggests to me. Apparently he wants to be alone with Ryder. Lacking a reason to blame him and grateful for an excuse to stretch my legs and survey my surroundings, I take off after them. I catch up just in time to hear something in their conversation about the girls' track team, something I know zero about. I decide to just walk along and pretend I'm part of the conversation.

"Hey, DJ," they say to me, "Are you on any teams back at college?"

"No, and what do I care about college? I'm on vacation."

"Yeah, but you did register and stuff, right?"

"For classes? Yeah. But let's not talk about that now. We're out in the middle of nowhere for Pete's sake; if this isn't 'getting away from it all', I don't know what is."

"Yeah, fine. We're just trying to get to know you."

"No, you're trying to get to know my school. What about you two? What do you do in your free time, other than this?"

"Geez, DJ, you don't have to bite our heads off for it," begins Braids, "I play a lot of soccer, and I used to do ballet when I was younger..."

"She had to quit because the other girls kept tripping on her hair!" K starts into a spasm of giggles over this.

"No, I had to quit because I was miserable in that class. They actually told me I was fat, can you believe it?"

"Were you?" I knew that was a mistake as soon as it came out of my mouth.

"No! I was the same as I am now! Soccer's much better, I think."

"What about you, K? What sports do you play?"

"Field hockey. Except my college doesn't have a field hockey team, so now... nothing. You?"

“Croquet.”

The girls look at me funny.

After a long morning of paddling downstream, stopping at a small embankment for lunch, and paddling for another hour, we finally reach one of the campsites that the Forestry Department has allotted for use by campers. There's a wooden placard facing the river inscribed with a little Native-American-sounding word that shows us that we can set up camp here. Upon docking the canoes, we find the campsite comes complete with a picnic table, outhouse, and metal semi-circle for building fires in. After setting up the tents again (Catapult and I are able to set up our tent with the benefit of light this time), Ryder announces we've got a good six and a half hours of daylight to spend however we please. Ryder starts unpacking a myriad of strange weather-worn equipment, Ashes requests Catapult's assistance in gathering some fallen logs and such for firewood, and K and Braids set off to use the "facilities". I decide to lay down the sleeping bags, and rest for a moment. I'm not really all that tired from rowing; I mean I could go on a while, but to pervert the old adage, the flesh is willing, but the spirit is apathetic and bored. Besides, it's better to get the bedding down now so Catapult and I aren't fumbling around with it later.

Now that I see it in the light, it really is a nice tent. It's big enough to accommodate two if necessary and one quite comfortably. The top grows narrow in a blend of dome and cone, and the very top has netting for holding small personal effects. The front and back each are mostly screen, and the canvas overlay that keeps out the rain and dew features a clear plastic window that aligns with one of them. Catapult and I had oriented the tent so that this window faced the fire pit, and I now had a perfect view of Ashes struggling to decipher the nuances of a lighter, and Catapult, squatted, hand on chin, brow furrowed, as though the pile of sticks and logs he was staring at raised an enigma. Only trouble was, I had to sit up to see out, and right now I felt like lying down. Ah well. I'm sure the two of them will solve the mystery eventually.

I lay down on the padded ground, a surprising boon to my lower back. Some time passes. The next thing I know, my attention is directed to a heavy, oppressive feeling all over my body. I sit up, put a hand to my head, and bring it back glistening with sweat. The sun must've been heating the tent like a greenhouse while I...slept? Had I fallen asleep? I gathered my watch and glasses out of the netting

and put them both on, then checked the time. It had only been a half an hour, and the sun was obviously still out. So what if I had been asleep? Had I missed anything more important than catching up on what I had so much trouble acquiring the night before? I should say not. My time's better spent in here, even if it is like a sauna in here. Saunas are good for the pores. On that note, I reach into my bag and produce a book of short stories I'd brought for the trip, and begin pouring over the contents. I barely get through a page before I hear a voice at the tent flap.

"You're out in the Maine wilderness for the first time in your life, and you're *reading*?" Ryder made it sound like an unacceptable act.

"It's my vacation, too." I don't even bother to raise my eyes to the window.

"You can read *books* any time you want!" Again, her voice suggests a level of revulsion.

"You mean like, now for example?"

"How often do you get to see the rolling mountains, the beautiful flora, and the crystal-clear waters of a lake system barely touched by humanity?"

"All day today, so far. You sound like a travel agent."

"DJ, a camp-out in the forest is no place to have a stick up your ass."

I hum the theme from Deliverance.

After a minute without a reply, I finally look up.

Ryder is gone, but she left her nose-prints on the plastic. I decide I might as well make an appearance; I don't want them having too much fun without me. I unzip the flap and step out, to be greeted with a cool, wafting breeze that reminds me how hot the tent was. All the same, I quickly seal up the flap. I'd rather keep the hot air in there where it may keep me warm tonight than have it waft out here where it definitely won't. Perhaps that's why last night was so cold; the air in the tent was the very same air blowing about that desolate excuse for a parking lot.

"DJ! There you are!" K calls out in surprise. "I thought you went swimming."

"Swimming?" Now that she mentions it, she looks like she just got back from a swim. But how? We're out in the woods.

"Yeah, down in the river." Oh. "Braids, Catapult and I were down there earlier, and I didn't see you there either. I thought you were up here. But then you weren't here either? What, were you in the outhouse?"

"No, I was in the tent." For a Cambridge scholar, this one displays a disturbing lack of logical reasoning.

“Oh.”

As the dialogue between K and I faded to an awkward pause, I sidle over to the fire pit to behold Ashes’ handiwork.

“How’s the fire?”

“Great. Catapult brought a vial of lighter fluid in his pocket and got it going right.”

In all fairness, it was going right. Vibrant orange flames leapt to a height of at least two feet, fed by branches of varying degree that he and Catapult had most likely scavenged from the surrounding woods.

“Mm-hmm.” Ashes nodded in appreciation of himself.

“Hmm.”

“Hm?”

“Nnnn.”

“Hm.”

There’s something about a campfire that makes you just want to stare at it for hours.

“Are you two cavemen going to help figure out dinner, or are you not yet finished grunting?” Braids calls from the picnic table with a sarcastic tone. She’d understand if she’d just have a look at this thing. Fire just plain propagates poetry.

“Yeah, you think you’re so much better than us?” I shoot back.

“We’re coming.” Ashes gets up from the fire and looks around, as if he’s coming out of a trance. “Where’s Catapult?”

“I was out gathering more wood for later tonight,” Catapult says, emerging from the brush with armloads of spoils. “Where’s Ryder?”

“Swimming.” It seems like everyone’s going swimming today. “She said something about telling DJ to... see that she was swimming, or something. I wasn’t paying attention. She said she was going for a swim, and then she mentioned DJ’s name.”

“Dude, I think she wants you down there swimming.”

“Dude, I’m beginning to think the whole freaking world wants me down there in that freaking river. If life had an author and this was a big novel or something, it’s like the author’s groping for a plot device to get me in that freaking river.”

“Well, you’ve got about two hours of sunlight, and one hour before the temperature starts to drop. Your call, man.”

“I’ll swim tomorrow. Now, are we doing dinner here or what?”

We were doing dinner, steak and baked potatoes cooked in the fire. Ashes and I take turns holding the frying pan over the fire while K and Braids fuss around with the table making something that involved tomatoes. Ryder returns from the river and makes some sarcastic comment about how I sat in the tent and didn't go swimming.

"Now I know why they call her Ryder."

"Why?" Catapult asked as he poured half a chopped onion into the frying pan."

"Cause she's going to ride me for that all weekend."

Actually, a swim sounded pretty good, but after K said that Ryder had specifically mentioned that she expected me down there, I was just too proud to let her know I was making decisions that revolve around her. Oh, pardon me, I mean I was just too proud to let her *believe* I was making decisions that revolve around her. I wasn't actually.... uh, never mind.

As the sun starts to sink below the tree line and it appears the steak is cooked through, our whole group adjourns to the picnic table to eat. The steak and potatoes are pretty good, and K and Braids have made a vegetable dish that I have to admit is a cut above the food served on campus. And it's also nice to have all six of us in one place for the first time since the van ride up. I suppose this band of rabble is beginning to grow on me. Or maybe it's because they're my link back to civilization, so I just instinctively feel better when they're all in plain view. Especially Ryder. Must be because she has the keys to the Vanagon.

Dinner passes by under idle chit-chat of affairs left back in Cambridge. Not wanting to concern myself with such menial worries for the same reason Ryder doesn't want me to read books, I stay silent. My attention is split between the rhythmic flares of the campfire and the piece of stainless steel Ryder put over it, which she claims is some sort of percolator. Earlier I saw her put half a chocolate bar in it. After dinner, everyone stacks their plastic plates and forks in a pile. K volunteers to wash them in the river, and I volunteer to dry. Catapult loans me his mini-flashlight, since the sun is down and twilight is fast expiring.

"So.....DJ?" K asks me as she starts rinsing off a plate.

"So.....what?" I reply as she hands me the plate and I begin to polish it off.

"How come you decided to, uh..."

"Come along on this fools' odyssey?"

"Yeah. No offense, but it seems like you..."

"Don't really fit in?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know. I don't really fit in back in Cambridge either. I thought a weekend away from the city would be a good life experience, a way to wrap up the summer break with a bang, I suppose. I didn't realize I'd be expected to...."

"Interact with people?"

"Yeah."

I stack the clean, dry plates on the seat of the canoe bobbing with the waves next to me, and hand K the silverware.

"Do you know anybody out here?"

"Just Catapult. And Braids, as an acquaintance. You?"

"Braids and I have known each other since middle school, and Ryder and Ashes' families have known mine since before I was born. We go way back." She scrubs a tough spot off a spoon and looks over at me, "Something wrong?"

"I had friends that went way back, too. They just didn't come far forward enough."

"Huh?"

"I've moved a few times in my life. Seems like I'm only in one place long enough to make good friends and then I lose them. Promises to keep in touch are the easiest ones to break."

"Wow, that's like a sad poem or something."

"I know a thing or two about sad poems. I went through the whole teenage angst poetry journal thing and watched the jocks and the cheerleaders with frustrated eyes like everyone else. We've all gone through that, right?"

"Actually, I was a cheerleader. But it's not as glamorous as it looks. Lots of pressure everywhere."

"Good. Then all is right with the world."

K laughs as she hands me the last of the forks. I exchange it for the frying pan.

"Darn it, I thought we were done! This water's cold." She stands on her left foot and grabs her right. I thought she'd been standing on a rock this whole time like me, but now I realize that she'd walked right into the river. In sandals.

"Why don't you just stand on a rock?" I ask.

"Oh, good idea. Where is there one?"

I look around the area where we tied up the canoes hours ago, scanning the water with Catapult's flashlight. "I don't see another one, I think the one I'm on might be..."

Before I finish the sentence, the flashlight beam rests on K's knees, which are now inches from my own. "You're right, it is big enough for two." That wasn't what I was going to say, but it was close enough. With that, she squats back down to continue washing the pan. I squat down next to her, being very careful not to crowd her off the rock.

"You know, you sort of remind me of my little brother. Except a lot smarter."

"I'll take that as a compliment."

"He's always had trouble making friends. Mom took him to a counselor once, but they said there was nothing wrong with him."

"There's nothing with me, either."

"Oh! I didn't mean... I'm sorry, I—"

"It's fine, I know what you meant."

"Okay"

A few seconds of scrubbing pass, and then she hands me the pan.

"DJ?"

"Yeah?"

"Why are you squatting down to dry dishes? It's not like you need to reach the water..."

"Oh, I was just trying to...be polite."

"Oh, okay. Hey, you want me to hold the flashlight while you dry?"

"Sure."

I juggle the pan, flashlight, and dish towel awkwardly as she reaches over to relieve me of one without compromising my hold on the other two.

"Hey DJ, look!"

I look out to where she's pointing, and am rewarded with a Kinkade-worthy panorama of the crescent moon setting over a mountain range. From there, my attention is diverted straight up to a stellar display unlike anything visible from any university clock tower or observation deck in Cambridge. Out of the corner of my eye I can see K lift her head to match mine, and her expression reflects how I feel. I can't help but wonder how much you can truly better yourself in the hardbound libraries and schedule-bound lectures of a college that can't even show you this.

"So beautiful..." K whispers to me in the awe-struck tones of a child, even though she still would have whispered it the same way had I not been there. But I was glad I was there.

"Yeah... now I know why I came on this trip."

With the dishes done and put back into Ryder's bag, it becomes undeniably obvious that Maine forests undergo much more drastic temperature shifts than Massachusetts cities in the summer, as K is running to her tent for warm socks and my hands are feeling numb from just handling wet dishes. I can only imagine with shock and sympathy the sensations going through K's wet, frostbitten feet. I follow her to her tent and stand at the flap to ask if she's okay. I can hear the shivering in her voice, but she still has a sense of humor about it.

Once K emerges clad in wool socks and hiking boots, Braids calls K and I over to two lawn chairs set up facing the fire, presumably the only warm spot around. She, Ashes, Ryder, and Catapult are already seated and waiting for us to complete the circle. We sit down gratefully as Catapult hands us each a marshmallow on a stick.

"Must've been cold down there, huh?" Braids asks us, or maybe she's just asking K.

"Yeah," we both reply in unison. I've retrieved my jacket from my tent, and K has her feet as close to the fire as possible without damaging her shoes.

"Thanks for taking care of the dishes, you two."

"No problem."

"Yeah, we only have six plates, so we're gonna have to wash them after each meal."

"Well, not after marshmallows anyway."

"Yeah, everybody eat your fill! We got plenty!"

The night goes on through a fire-heated atmosphere of good cheer and lively conversation for what could be hours and yet can't be long enough. Certainly nobody wants to leave the circle; we're on vacation with no responsibilities beyond survival, the marshmallows are abundant and so is the amity, and besides that, the night air is a constant impending force kept at bay only by the fire. Truly this must be what people have in mind when they plan camping trips, and it's certainly worth the effort of driving, flying, paddling to this spot.

As the night progresses, I finally learn how it came to be that I ended up here at all; Catapult, Ashes, and Ryder had been friends in high school, and it was through him that I was invited. Apparently I had made quite an impression on Catapult years ago, as Ashes especially had tales to recount of what he had heard of me through Catapult here and there, and this was why my name had arisen when Ashes, Catapult, and Ryder had been plotting out this expedition. From here the conversation leads, as I suspected it eventually would, to tales from Ashes', Braids',

Ryder's, and K's childhood and of things I knew nothing about, and so I know that I had gone from esteemed guest to coincidental bystander. Having been in this situation before, I handle it with my usual aplomb by making a trivial excuse for myself, thanking them all for the evening's entertainment, and excusing myself from the forum.

Back inside the tent, my theory has been proven correct, as it feels at least ten degrees warmer inside. Finding Catapult's flashlight still in my pocket, I turn it on and put it in the roof netting, providing a light by which to change and settle within the cocoon of sleeping bags, thermal blankets, and tent floor pads lain down to soften the rocky ground. Once securely in the tent bed, I find it quite warm indeed in contrast to last night's hasty bunk. I put my glasses in the netting, move to one side of the tent to accommodate Catapult coming in later without shoving me around, and turn off the light. Now I'm immersed in the darkness of wilderness, save the soft red glow of the campfire radiating weakly through the plastic window. I can hear the soft sounds of chatting voices and the louder sounds of crickets and the river washing over rocks. It's a very good atmosphere, perfect for sleep.

It's morning.

My first sentient thought of the day.

The sky is lightening up, and Catapult lies next to me, snoring. The third thermal blanket was a bit much. I kick it off and sit up. The fire is reduced to an ember of its former self. It should be out completely by now. I reach for my watch. It's 10 of 8, a reasonable time to get up. Someone must already be up. Someone must have fed the fire.

As if in reward to my deductive reasoning, I hear a clattering that can only be Ryder's metal cookware, but not necessarily Ryder operating it. I decide to get up, but I don't want to get dressed just yet, in case Catapult wakes up and sees me changing. My pajamas are sufficient for just a trip to the outhouse.

Slipping my feet into my shoes that sit just outside the zipper but still under the overhang of the rain cover, I quietly slink out of the tent. I don't bother to rezip the flap; it's comfortably warm and I haven't seen a bug since the rest stop in New Hampshire. Over at the table, a cooler lies ajar alongside Ryder's portable stove. From the shoreline I hear a girl's voice humming. I walk over to the fire and poke it with a stick to stir up a few embers, and discover that a few of last night's baked potatoes remain in the fire. Must've

been an oversight, I think to myself on my way to what we foolishly call the "facilities".

Upon finishing up in the wooden phone booth containing nothing more than a bench with a foul hole in it, I return to the campsite to find not only how pleasant pine trees and wood smoke can be to the nose, but also Ryder fishing the baked potatoes out of the fire.

"Guess we missed a few, eh?"

"Oh, DJ! Didn't know you were up! No, I left these here on purpose, remember?"

"Uhhh..."

"Oh, right, that was after you went to bed. These are going to make great home fries for breakfast today."

"Home fries, eh? I haven't had home fries in at least five years."

"Yeah, well, you know they'll be good 'cause I start cooking them the night before. The flavor is slow-baked in, and..." Then, after a second look at me, "Why are you dressed like Hugh Hefner?"

"I'm not. He wears silk pajamas. These, in the spirit of the occasion, are flannel."

"You still look like Hugh Hefner," Ryder says critically.

"I don't look like an octogenarian, Ryder. Are those eggs?"

"Yup. You wanna scrambl'em for me?"

"Might as well."

"When they're ready for cooking, use the stove, okay? It cooks them more evenly. I'll use the campfire for the coffee. Maybe that'll wake up the rest of the bunch."

"Okay."

After about ten minutes of whipping seven eggs with milk, I pour them into the large frying pan Ryder brought along, despite the fact that "travel" is the last word I'd use to describe the unwieldy thing. The aroma of coffee percolating the old-fashioned way lures the other four out one by one, and apparently Ashes, K, and Braids each decided that pajamas were suitable for a casual breakfast as well.

"Morning, folks," Ryder greets the crowd.

"Good morning, Ryder, DJ, Catapult, Ashes!" K offers in a tone that reminds one of the finches chirping happily in the trees. Ashes mutters his felicitations, and Braids just yawns as she reties her errant dreadlocks. Again I am just slightly awestruck at the sheer length of them; as she sits down at the picnic table, the end of each braid rests on the

dirt. I quickly shunt my gaze back to the pan full of eggs before I am accused of gawking.

"What's for breakfast?"

"Eggs, home fries, and coffee," Ryder and I say between the two of us.

"DJ, how'd Ryder rope you into breakfast duty?"

"I woke up first."

"So are we staying here today, too, or—"

"Nope. After breakfast we'll load up the canoes and press onward. This river goes on for ten more miles before we hit Lobster Lake, and we have to be at the dock there by Sunday afternoon to meet the pilots again. If we miss that flight, we miss the first day of classes next semester."

"That's when the professors all file their rosters."

"If we don't make it to class—"

"What's today, Friday?"

"- we just wasted a semester's tuition?"

"Calm down, people. We'll make it there in time. We'll just have to paddle hard."

"It is all downstream."

"Eggs are ready."

And so we sit down to breakfast. Ashes monopolizes the conversation with talk of rowing and rivers he's rowed, while Ryder just listens on. The gleam in her eye obviously reflects her hanging on his every word and longing to be on those rivers. Probably with him there too. Catapult and Braids are having a side conversation, and K produces a compact and proceeds to put on her makeup. I just sit and eat my potatoes in peace, allowing the wind to blow at my back. Ryder offers me coffee from her 1950's percolator, but I don't even drink 21<sup>st</sup> century coffee. She looks disappointed. She must think that silver pot is quite the accessory. Catapult is bubbling over with self-appreciation at eating with his collapsible fork/spoon/knife, and Braids seems happy to feed the fire of his ego. Out of the corner of my eye I see Ryder offer K a sip from her canteen.

A round of second helpings, a few minutes for everyone to get dressed, and a cleanup session later, it's time to disembark. The tents, coolers, lawn chairs, and sleeping bags are all folded, sealed up, and loaded meticulously onto the pair of canoes that just barely accommodate so much equipment and three passengers each. Ashes asks Catapult and I to launch our canoe while he puts out the fire.

"So, how do you want to do this?"

"Remember what Ashes and Ryder said yesterday?"

"No....no I don't."

"The back seat is where the steering person sits—"

"We'll leave that to Ashes."

"-and the front seat person just has to paddle well."

"You can do that. I paddled well yesterday."

"Sweet. I get a chance to try out this baby." Catapult produces a small plastic paddle head from under his letter jacket, and with a push of a button, it telescopes into a full-length paddle. Immediately the girls, preparing for launch in the other canoe, are quite impressed by this little marvel.

"Whoa!"

"Well, shazam!"

"Nice rod, man!"

"Catapult, that'll never hold up, you know." Ashes returns from dousing the campfire just in time to douse Catapult's excitement.

"What do you mean?"

"The shaft isn't sturdy enough. The current'll snap it in half."

"What? I paid \$20.37 for this!"

"You got ripped off."

"Where'd you get that kind of money for a fancy paddle?" Catapult is too crestfallen to answer me.

"Come on, boys, let's go!" The girls are already stowed and have pushed off from the rocks. Catapult jumps into the front seat and takes up the regular wooden paddle, while Ashes takes the back. The middle seat—doesn't exist. I straddle the boat and sit on top of a red cooler I haven't seen before except out of the corner of my eye. Pulling my feet up to keep them dry, I notice that the canoes are riding rather low in the water due to excessive cargo. I can only hope for the best.

We set off down the river just as the sun starts to come out from behind the clouds. A mere hour later, the chill of the lingering night air is completely driven away by the gentle warmth of sunshine. The next thing I know, the girls have pulled their canoe right up alongside ours. Braids and Catapult, each at the forefront of their respective vessels, begin to exchange whispers. Ashes and Ryder hail each other and discuss techniques of navigating the river. I look to my left and see two big, red, overstuffed, vinyl bags. Between them, K has squeezed herself in tightly, sprawled among the bags, extending a foot over one side and into the water. For her sake I hope those bags she's sitting on are clothing bags and not cookware bags.

"You alright in there?"

"Yeah, I'm okay," K pulls herself up, leaning on one bag like a pillow and bringing us into each others' lines of sight, "Just a little warm."

I notice her sweatshirt laying on top of another parcel. "The river's probably cold."

"I can't get at the river without capsizing the boat. Also this vinyl sticking to my arms is killing me."

"Sending you to your vinyl resting place?" I couldn't resist. K bursts out laughing.

"Hey, DJ! You wanna hand me a soda?" Braids calls to me.

"Soda? Where?"

"You're sitting on them!"

After a bit of struggle requiring me to grab the side of the girls' canoe and K to steady my shoulder, I'm finally able to get fully off of the cooler, allowing K to reach inside (not without much shaking of both canoes) and fetch out a soda for Braids, Catapult, Ryder, and herself. Apparently the cooler was their primary reason for pulling alongside of us. Finally K shuts the cooler and I can sit back down.

"Here, DJ." K hands me a soda can just as Braids and Ryder push away from our canoe.

"Me? I didn't even ask for one."

"After all that, you've earned it."

"Wow... thanks."

K shoots me a smile as she slumps back into her cargo nest and out of sight. With nothing else to do, I just watch the canoe drift away and the riverbanks drift past as I open the soda can and take a sip. It's my favorite flavor. Must just be a coincidence.



**SARAH BENSON**

*Tree*

## *Life and Death*

Ten years might seem a long time to have the same job, but being an emergency medical technician means that any given 24-hour shift might bring a new experience that I have never seen before. In my ten years as an EMT, I have experienced many rewarding, and an equal number of horrific, events. Everyday I know there is the possibility that lives might begin, or even end, through my own hands. In the beginning of my career, I tried to stay distant from my patients, never thinking of them as “real” people, or having compassion for their illness or injuries. In the summer of 1996, this all changed.

My twenty four hour shift started out the usual way. I talked with the previous crew and received report on the status of the truck and any missing equipment. This was also a good time to catch up on any good calls that might have happened during the previous shift. As an EMT, my mind works differently from others'. I enjoy hearing about the blood and gore, serious motor vehicle accidents and the nasty traumas; not because I am glad when people are injured, but because it is my job, and I might learn something from these accidents.

After talking with the prior crew, my partner and I started to check our ambulance, making sure it was stocked and ready to go. We weren't very happy, being stuck with A3, one of the oldest trucks in the fleet. The checklist is long and tedious, including 24 Band-Aid's, 40 4x4's, 8 rolls of 4" kling gauze, and 12 tongue depressors.

I don't think any of us ever really counted out 24 Band-Aid's; we just made sure we had some in the cabinet. We always joked, “As long as we have oxygen, gloves, and an Ambu-Bag, we can wing anything else.”

The next part of our daily routine was by far the most important one, deciding what was for dinner and what crew was going out to pick it up. Some people passed the time between calls by watching television, doing homework, playing cards, or my favorite: sitting outside and people watching. These various activities helped pass

the time while we waited for the phone to ring. This was how the Fire Department would reach us for an emergency call.

The phone rang and it was the first call of the day. I took the information from the Fire Department, "A1 to respond to the Mariner Nursing Home on Electric Avenue for a ventilator-dependent patient going to Leominster hospital to rule out a collapsed lung." I went back to the crew room and told my partner that we had a call. On the way to the truck, we joked about how it was probably another "bullshit" call, assuming this from past experience.

As I drove to the location, weaving in and out of traffic with my siren wailing and red lights flashing, my partner flipped a coin to see who would have to be the primary care giver, known as the Tech. It was tails, which meant I lost the flip, again. I tried to barter with my partner, offering to Tech the next three calls, if she'd take this one. However, she didn't accept my offer. I thought to myself how I disliked dealing with patients on a ventilator. My partner and I joked about how people don't pull over and stop when they see a big white truck with red lights on it coming up behind them, but luckily we made it to the nursing home in about five minutes.

As I pulled into the parking lot and backed up to the door, I radioed the Fire Department to let them know we had arrived at the scene. We then grabbed our bags and the stretcher, and started up the ramp. The residents sitting on the front porch watched us approaching, and we said a quick hello as we hurried by.

Upon entering the building, we were directed to corridor three. As we walked down the hall, the sound of a ventilator alarm met me at the same time as the familiar smell of ammonia. We were then met by a nurse who took us into our patient's room, and as she gave us a report, I observed a male patient lying in bed, wearing a Red Sox baseball hat. I began my assessment as the nurse finished her report, concluding that he most likely had pneumonia.

We then lifted him to our stretcher and covered him with blankets. Before I took him off his ventilator and began to bag him, I told him what we were going to do. I then disconnected the ventilator, and started to breathe for him with the Ambu-Bag. As we were bringing him to the truck, I was extremely nervous. It is difficult to ventilate a conscious person with an Ambu-Bag, but I tried my best not to cause him any discomfort as we loaded him into the truck.

During the transport, I continued to talk to my patient as I manually ventilated him, trying to relax him. A few minutes into the transport he reached over and put his hands on mine and showed me the rate and the volume of each ventilation. At first I was scared, but then he smiled for me and I knew he was ok, and that I was doing a good job. After that I was more comfortable and relaxed. He amazed me how, in this kind of situation, he could still smile like when my partner used the truck's siren to get through the heavy traffic.

As we arrived at the hospital, we took him to his awaiting room. It took a few minutes for the respiratory department to arrive to take over and place him on a ventilator. During this time, I gave a report to the nurse and said goodbye to Frankie. As I walked out of the room, he looked over and lifted his hand and gave me a thumbs up. It put a smile on my face. During the rest of my shift, I kept thinking about how he was doing, and if he was ok.

Throughout the next couple months, whenever I was at the Mariner, I would make a point to stop into Frankie's room and see how he was doing. He would always have a smile on his face and would lift his hand to give me his usual thumbs-up. On occasion, whenever I had a few minutes to spare, I stopped and sat with him as he watched the Red Sox games on TV.

One evening I responded to a report of a cardiac arrest at the Mariner. It was Frankie's roommate who coded. I remember working this patient, trying to bring him back. As I stood next to his bed and prepared to shock his heart, I looked to make sure that no one was touching him. I said "clear," looking across the room, and noticed the tears in Frankie's eyes as I shocked the patient. Frankie was devastated as his friend's life left through my hands. I tried as hard as I could to help this man, but even with all of our hard work, machines, and drugs, it just wasn't enough. We lost him.

On the next Sunday evening that I was working, I made a point to stop in and see how Frankie was doing. As I walked down corridor three and approached his room, I noticed that his bed was empty and had been made with fresh bed linens. I had a horrible feeling, my heart began to race and I felt sick. I knew something was wrong as I made my way to the nurse's station. The charge nurse told me the bad news: Frankie died on Friday evening.

I should have been there. It was my shift and truck, but I had a day off. Would I have been able to make a difference? Would things have turned out differently with

me there? I felt guilty and sad, but I began to think about how he touched my life and the things I learned from him, about life and optimism, friendship and love.

At the beginning of that 24-hour shift, I never thought that I would meet someone that would affect me in the way Frankie did. He taught me that becoming more than just an EMT to a patient is worth the heartbreak I risk by being a friend. Through his optimism, his smile, and that thumbs-up that I could always count on, Frankie helped me grow as a person and a professional, affecting my life in a way no other person has ever done before, and I'll never forget that.

## *Standing Tall*

I am sitting atop a ten-foot ladder, straddling it with the hopes I do not fall off. I am wearing a colorful wig and the largest hoop skirt you've ever seen. I am not fond of heights, so my stomach feels like I've just stepped off a roller coaster ride and in my head I am wondering, "How did I get here?" Just then, my husband puts his hands on the ladder to steady it, offering me some reassurance about my predicament, but as he does, I can't help noticing how comical he looks with the turban still on his head from his earlier performance.

The tempo of the music changes and my heart starts to race. My husband reaches up and squeezes my hand and I realize he too is nervous. From our spot in the wings, we watch our twelve-year-old son cross and take center stage. As he stands there so straight and tall, waiting for just the right moment to begin, I feel a lump rise in my throat and a burning sensation in the back of my eyes. I can't help but wonder if he has any idea how much he has influenced and shaped our family just by dancing to follow his dream.

Four years earlier, Travis came to us and in his usual matter of fact way, announced that he had decided to take ballet. This really should have been no surprise to us; he'd been talking about it for years. We had been attending the local performance of the "Nutcracker" every year since he turned three. We were a little shocked to discover the first time that he could actually sit still for two hours. He was mesmerized not only by the music, but also the dancers. We knew then that he was hooked.

For months after seeing the show, he would proceed to play the CD endlessly, providing "hours" of entertainment for anyone willing to watch, enlisting only the help of his younger sister to act out the many different roles from the performance. However, on this particular occasion he was insistent that we contact the man in charge of the ballet, because this time he was finally ready to dance for real. I could see that he was serious, but I felt I needed to enlighten him about the many obstacles he would face as a young boy

choosing to dance. I did this not to be mean – my intent was only to prepare him for what might come.

My husband's occupation is that of a physical education teacher and coach. Over the years, he has had some trouble understanding why it is that Travis cannot see the finer points of football, basketball, baseball, etc. I suspect also that explaining Travis's unique choice of activities to his friends, that are for the most part former jocks who continue to dabble in weight lifting and the "over thirty" softball league, was giving him cause for concern. I, on the other hand, worry more about how his peers will accept this news. He has always been a bit eccentric, choosing to wear a suit instead of jeans one day, and cowboy boots instead of sneakers the next. This is different though; this choice is bound to separate him from his friends who play organized sports and all play on the same team. We try to relay all of this to him, not to discourage him (or so we tell ourselves), but so he can make an informed decision.

Travis prevailed, using our own logic as his defense. He said, "I'm not going to worry about what other people think, as long as I'm doing something I enjoy." So this began our journey into the world of ballet and the many experiences, both positive and negative that would come to change us.

Travis's teacher turned out to be a very stern man who expected nothing but total dedication from his dancers. "You are to be here early, leave late, and sweat, sweat, sweat." His classes were very rigorous and I was concerned about how Travis would handle it. I was concerned that his dance classes were turning out to be much more physically demanding than any sport he had tried. I need not have worried though, Travis flourished in this environment. His father was impressed by the structure and endurance Travis was exhibiting. I was thrilled that he had found that niche where he felt comfortable to be himself and was accepted for it. We saw a different side to him and couldn't wait to get to know the person that was emerging.

Unfortunately, we eventually had to leave class and venture out into the real world, and this world is not always kind. The reality is, we live in a small town with little understanding of the arts and we are raising a boy who is choosing to wear ballet shoes and tights, instead of shin pads and a helmet.

We spent a lot of time those first couple of years trying to reassure Travis that he made the right decision. We explained that dance is not only for girls and that it does not mean you're "gay" if you do it. We try to comfort him with

phrases like, "Kids can be cruel, they'll outgrow it," or, "People are afraid of what they don't understand." This was difficult for us though, because the reactions we encountered from some adults made us wonder if some of the kids really would outgrow it.

At some point, things began to change. I found Travis offering me words of encouragement. After one particular encounter with some boys from the upstairs karate class commentating on my son's sexual orientation while he was dancing, I was visibly shaken. I got a small glimpse of a world Travis enters every day when he leaves for school. He would mention it occasionally, but always with a shrug and a, "Who cares?"

I watched for his reaction, knowing he heard the exchange and was surprised at what I saw. He was standing a little bit straighter and dancing with more determination. As class ended he gave me a quick hug and said, "Don't worry Mom, they just don't understand." At that moment, I was in awe of this child of mine who was changing so rapidly. I thought about the courage he displayed when once a year he was forced to perform in front of his classmates and how brave he was to then go back and face them, knowing there would be that select few who would have something not so nice to say.

I don't necessarily like some of the reasons my son is forced to mature so young, but I know that I am extremely proud of him, and strive to be more like him. He has given our family a new energy, the ability to try new things, take chances, and rely on our inner strengths for encouragement, not on the acceptance of others. I have no idea how to explain this to him, to let him know that he has made us better people and has completely enriched our lives.

My husband and I have made the decision to perform with him. We want to experience his world and share his love for dance. We are performing in the "Nutcracker" and actually have to dance in the first scene. Remarkably, we discover that my husband has quite a knack for waltzing and he preens a little as he lets me know Travis must get his talent from him. I, on the other hand, am very grateful for the long skirt that is covering my two left feet.

The second act puts me on top of this ladder. I am to be "Mother Ginger," which requires me to frantically wave my arms around and smile while being rolled across the stage. Meanwhile, a festively dressed group of young dancers run out from beneath my skirt, and I am to appear calm and composed while this is all happening. Not as easy as it sounds!

So, here we are, after questioning his judgment so many years ago, right along side him. I feel so lucky to be able to understand his love for and dedication to ballet in a way that I could never have achieved if we were reduced to just tossing a ball to each other.

Everything is quiet; the only sound I hear as the spotlight hits my son is my young daughter whispering to anyone who will listen, "That's my brother." He is about to dance the "Tarantella," a solo usually reserved for the senior dancers. This is quite an honor and he has worked hard to achieve it. He listens for the right moment, and then begins to move. We can't help but be entranced, a transformation takes place and Travis's usual awkwardness disappears. He is exuding self-confidence. He doesn't just dance to the music, he becomes one with it. His movements are an extension of the life this music is breathing into him. He is so graceful you seem to forget just how difficult these spins, turns, and kicks must be. I am overwhelmed with emotion. The expression on my son's face is one of pure joy – the kind that can only be achieved by accomplishing your ultimate goal. I actually wonder for a moment after seeing it, if I've ever experienced such a thing myself.

The dance lasts only a couple of minutes, but for the three of us, it is a culmination of the last few years. As the music slows and the dance comes to an end, the audience breaks out in applause. Travis flashes a quick smile towards the wings and we give him a thumbs up. He has accomplished so much and deserves this moment. He turns to take a bow, and my husband hands me a tissue to wipe away my tears. The applause wanes and it seems to me as if my son floats, not walks, offstage, and I again am struck by how he is standing, so straight and tall.

## *Balance*

Nineteen hours in a car is a long time. But some things in life are worth the wait, and when I stepped out of our big gray conversion van I knew this was one of them. At the time, as I stretched the kinks out of my legs and looked up at the house we had rented by the beach, I was excited yet apprehensive about spending a full week there in Cape Breton. The place didn't even have an internet hook-up, and we would learn that it didn't have a usable television either. It didn't really matter, though, because we had the wind and the rocks and the waves.

Wreck Cove is not a place that inspires illusions of grandeur or awe. The houses were so far apart that to trick-or-treat the kids would have to walk for miles. The school looked like it had about four rooms and its biggest attraction was that it had public computer access from time to time. The houses were mainly trailer homes or tiny little homesteads. None is as big as the average house back in my town. The one grocery store on that end of the Cape was lucky to even get butter in and was indefinitely sold out of eggs. They did have bacon, though, the salty thick-slice kind. The town was ecstatic when two new houses were built the past year, as it was a sign that the five hundred something population was growing.

In short, there was nothing stately or grand about the place. It was a town that had been overlooked by almost everything, even the Ontario tourists who sped through on their way to the Highlands National Park. There it was, and there we were staying for a week. As a person used to flipping on the computer anytime she wanted, I'd simply have to get over it. During my stay there I found something much more important than being annoyed about the difficulty of obtaining white bread. There was something there, something wonderful that I didn't see in my hometown, but being unfamiliar with what it was it took me until long after we left to see clearly. It was the people.

Our hosts Gilbert and Jitka were two of the most wonderful people I'd ever met. Their house was literally our

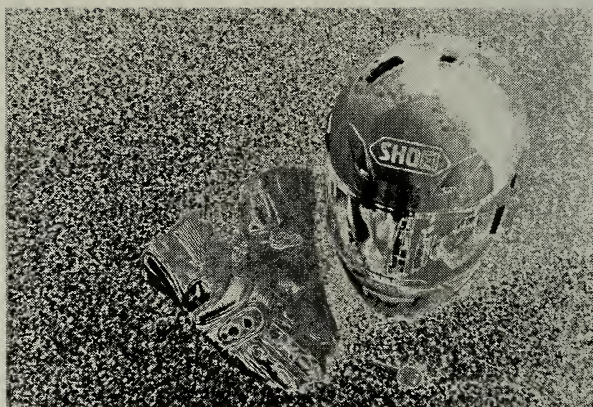
house. When we could find no eggs, Gilbert gave us the ones his chickens had laid that morning for free, and offered us the unlimited use of his game room. He and his wife, who raised trout in their ponds, were artists and writers, and Gilbert himself was a noted French cook. They spoke to us of how in the winter they could sleep in if they chose, and could go snowshoeing over the mountains if they wanted. They had no boss, no one to tap their watch at them, no one to be annoyed.

Then there was the ferry operator, whom we saw each day as we crossed St. Anne's Bay. When I first thought about it I decided that he must lead one of the most boring lives imaginable. He only lived and worked in one of the most gorgeous places I'd ever been, shuttling cars and people back and forth across the misty bay as wild seabirds and bald eagles flew overhead and giant fish leapt in the waters around him. Five days was enough to have me envying him.

Donalda ran a puffin boat tour which I wheedled my family into taking. She spoke to us about the little black and white seabirds that whizzed by the boat. She fed the wild eagles when they passed by. Some of them were young, she said, and needed a little help getting food sometimes. She laughed with us as the grey spotted seal heads popped out of the water around us to peer curiously at the marine tourists passing through their home. And she was always excited and dashed from each end of the boat to tell us all each time a puffin was spotted. On the way back to port, she told about how she fishes for lobsters when they're in season, how she runs her own little businesses and makes a pretty darn good living doing it, about how she was proud of her son who was a Canadian Mountie. She spoke of how she lived a busy but rewarding life.

It made me think about the people back home who are always rushing around, trying to stick to schedules and never having time to really live. They were so caught up in trying to afford a fancy new car that they never even thought about snowshoeing in the mountains. Life in America was seemingly prosperous but out of balance. We have wealth but not happiness, security but not simplicity.

A week seemed like a long time, but by the end I felt like I had only just begun to settle into the slow and steady life there. I didn't want to leave. I didn't even care about the internet anymore.



**CHRIS AHO**

*Solarization*

## *Road to Marathon*

Usually when a kid starts out as a sprinter in eighth grade, he doesn't think that he will someday run a marathon. See the funny thing is, I can remember back when we did our track warm ups, we had to run a mile, and I can distinctly remember bitching and moaning about how that was too much and that sprinters shouldn't be running that much. Well, little did I know at that time, I would pack on another 25.2 to that one mile and not bitch about it until the end.

In middle school, we never ran more than a mile at practice and boy was I wiped at the end of the day. I would usually go home feeling good and not do anything until the next day, or if I was lucky and it was Friday, I wouldn't do anything for the whole weekend. As a sprinter, I was required to run no more than a 200 meter race, so when it came time to run a 400 meter race, I would drop dead at the end. As far as getting better, yeah, that didn't get me very far with a mentality like that. All that got me was a rude awakening going into high school track and field.

I thought it was going to be a breeze. I thought it was going to be just like middle school. I thought I would be running no more than a mile at each practice. I THOUGHT WRONG! I saw the sign that said the track team will be holding a meeting for all those interested. My best friend Dave and I, being the "big runners" that we were, decided to show up because once you start running you can never get out of it. We showed up not expecting a whole lot because we had heard that the coach was a really cool guy, but do you know what the first words out of the coach's mouth were after taking the names? "This is not going to be like middle school." Yeah, just my luck.

The practices turned out to be not that bad. In fact the whole freshman year went very well. After the coach had said, "Mangsen will soon be in charge of the sprinters someday," my confidence was really boosted. It seems as though when the years go on, you get better and better at what you do if you actually give a damn. That's exactly what I did. I laid it all down and said the hell with this; I am going to show all of them up.

Sophomore year I joined cross country and slowly took it over at the same time that I got the most improved award for the track season. Junior year brought more hopes than accomplishments. We lost our track coach when he took the head football coaching job that was offered to him. That wasn't the biggest disappointment. We did acquire a very good coach that came from a high school not too far from us. One of the biggest disappointments was that I didn't win the 55 meter dash that year. I made it into the finals but ended up finishing 5<sup>th</sup>. Another hope was to grab a captain spot on the outdoor team, but that didn't end up happening. Another let down was I had hoped to win the 200 meter sprint against Derby (another high school), but that didn't end up happening, as I lost by two-tenths of a second. Oh well, shit happens I guess.

Senior year, on the other hand, turned out a lot better. I went on to capture the captain spot for cross country, earned multiple ribbons from different races, and the "most improved award" at the end of the season. Both indoor and outdoor track, however, did not bring as many positive points. I never got a captain spot, which I do believe got robbed from me. One perk that the track season did bring was our 4x100 meter relay team made it to the state finals. We didn't do too hot. I think we might have gotten last. Oh well, at least we made it.

Running is like nicotine. Once you start, then it is really hard to kick the habit. I found myself sometimes asking if I should start to chew gum or to take a patch. Running, for me, got to the point where I wanted to quit. When you have an uncle that was and still is a world class runner, then a lot of pressure is put on you. "Why aren't you running on the weekends?" "How come you aren't the best sprinter that they have?" Those are some of the demands that I have heard from my mom who has pushed and pushed me with my running. I hated it then, but now I understand why.

After being in Texas and completely dominating the running in the Air Force for 4 1/2 months, I was let go. Coming back up to Connecticut was a complete change of pace as far as the conditions go. What this would do for me is put a hold on my passion for a little while. Yeah, I would do a couple races here and there, but nothing like what I was doing back in the "good ol' days."

The next thing that would really spark my fire was watching the Boston Marathon and being amazed by what those Kenyans do. Little did I know that you have to qualify to actually run in it. That means doing another marathon.

Man, talk about raining on my parade. Okay, just because the longest I have ever run was ten miles and a marathon is more than double, that didn't mean that I wouldn't do well. I was going to shake all of that off and enter myself in the Bay State Marathon in Lowell to be held on October 19<sup>th</sup>, just two days before my birthday! I went through some hardcore training that my uncle was helping me out with before I ran into a small problem. I was out on an eight-mile run and my knee was giving me huge problems. Now, any runner or non-runner would know that one month before a marathon is not a good time to have any kind of problem. Not thinking it was a big thing, I didn't tell anyone about it. I thought I knew everything and thought I could take care of it. I suppose that if you are expected to run 26.2 miles in three hours and eleven minutes or less, you should tell someone that you cannot even make it three miles. You know what my biggest fear was? It was the doctors, my uncle, or my mom who was coming to watch, telling me that I shouldn't do it.

Come race day, the temperature was in the low 40's, so it was a bit cold. Trying to warm up for the race was a job in itself. I didn't even get in two miles on the warm up, so I was starting to worry. I would just have to pray that I would make it through. Taped to my chest, I had a picture of myself, my sister, and my father, who passed away a little over a year before the race. He was always proud of my racing, but never really had the chance to see one. He would carry me pass the mile marker I wasn't even expecting to make it to. Finding a gentleman that had run a marathon before helped me a lot. I ran with him for a while, but then soon started to fade. At mile eleven, I hit the ground in pain. The medics came and treated me for a bit. Would that stop me? Hell no!! Getting up holding an ice pack on my knee, I continued. Not for long though. About a half a mile later, I dropped again. This time for good. Not being able to continue, the ambulance would take me to the hospital. That was it for me on race day. Happy birthday to me!!

Not running more than three miles for a whole month, I was wondering what had taken me that far. I knew exactly. My dad was watching over me. They weren't able to determine what was wrong with my knee, but I left with a whole leg brace and crutches. Try and figure that one out. Those stupid metal posts that were shoved under each armpit and the cast would last about four days. Good thing that I got recommended to a good doctor this time. This doctor was actually a runner, so he knew the difference between a sneeze and a wet fart if you know what I mean.

Instead of saying he really didn't know what was wrong like the geniuses over at Lowell hospital did, he said that it could be a slight tear in the back of my knee, but the pain was radiating up to the front. He told me that I shouldn't run for at least three weeks, and when I started running again, I should wear one of those blue knee brace things. So what do you think I did? I didn't run for three weeks. That's right. I took the least amount that I had to.

Having that knee brace on was starting to get on my damn nerves. That idea lasted about two weeks. Well, I knew that I wouldn't be running for the Boston Marathon 2004. I would have to wait until next year. It took about seven months for me to find another race so that I could try and qualify for Boston 2005. This time I took the easy way out. I would be going to the Palm Beach Marathon in beautiful West Palm Beach, Florida. Among the people that would be running it with me would be Kathi, one of my biggest running partners and inspirations, also her friend Brenda, whom I had met once before. Being up here in Massachusetts, I had to deal with the hills, so that set a good stage for the flats at West Palm Beach.

The race wasn't until November and it was only April, but I needed all of the prep work that I could use. My knee couldn't have felt better, so I knew this time was for real. The training that I did for the first marathon would be the same that I would do for this one: a strict diet, nice long runs four or five days a week, and one really long one being about 16-20 miles once a week. About five months flew by and boy did I feel the effects of running alone. I felt tired and burnt out, and I wanted to quit. The only thing that I was telling myself was that I had about two months left. Getting closer and closer to the race, I was starting to feel scared, asking myself, "is my knee going to be ok? Am I going to get the goal of three hours and eleven minutes and qualify? Am I actually going to finish?"

Soon enough, those very questions would be answered. Before I knew it, I was on a plane flying down to find out what I was really made of. November 13<sup>th</sup>, the day before the race, I met up with Kathi and Brenda in Tampa. She greeted me with a "Hey, Jonathan" and I greeted her with a desperate cry of "THEY LOST MY BAG WITH ALL OF MY RUNNING STUFF IN IT!!" Almost in tears, we went to the luggage claim, and they told us that I should be in on the next flight from Atlanta, where I had about thirty seconds for a layover. We calmly waited and sure enough, it was there. What a way to start the race weekend.

After that little burst of excitement, we made our way down to West Palm Beach where we would be greeted by another surprise. The expo that we were supposed to be at to get our race numbers closed at 6 o'clock and we thought that it closed at 8 o'clock. It was about 5:50 and we still had a couple traffic lights to go through. After Kathi screamed into the parking lot, and Brenda and I ran into the building, we got another surprise. Everyone else got their number except for Jonathan. I was told that my number had been given away. When I was done freaking out, I got it back. I was good to go. Yeah right, good to go!! Who was I kidding? The last time I saw this much havoc was when we knew George Bush was president!

Race day, here we are! November 14<sup>th</sup> 2004. With all of us up at about 4:00 in the morning, we had a couple hours to go. A little cloudy, but that's okay, right? Man, do those hours fly by when you don't want them to. At about 5:45 we were all lined up on the line. I had gone with the new Nike Air Streak Vapor IV shoes instead of the Saucony 3D Grid Hurricane 5 only because they weigh about 5.5 ounces instead of 11.5 ounces. Every ounce counts when you have to run 26.2 miles. My inspiration pictures of my father and my girlfriend, Erin, would be tucked in my running shorts instead of taped on my chest. These would be the people that would help me through this race.

WRREEHHH WRREEHHH!! The horn sounded at a little past 6:00. Having to run a 7:10 minute mile, I broke away from Kathi and Brenda, but would pass them after the turn around at mile four. The pace felt strong. I felt good. Mile five checked off a little faster than I anticipated, but nothing to worry about right? WRONG! Here came the wind and the rain off the coast. Just what I needed when I was feeling good. Thank God it stopped, for the time being that is. Mile ten was good to go, still a little faster than the pace I hoped for. Still nothing to worry about, right? WRONG!! Up came another rain storm, some more gusty winds, and the halfway point where I found out I was running a 6:58 pace!! YIKES!! I still had 13.1 miles to go, but it felt like thirty when I was watching the half marathon runners finishing.

"There are no hills, Jonathan" was what I was told all week. Yeah right. As I turned the corner to get to mile nineteen, I couldn't look straight ahead anymore. I HAD TO LOOK UP! Straight up the hill that was not supposed to be there. I knew at that time that there was no hope of me qualifying unless I could run seven miles in half an hour. Not even the Kenyans can do that. I was just focused on

finishing. I knew I could do it with the inspiration of my dad and the love of my life. Feeling the effects of lactic acid build up in my legs at mile 22 wasn't the best thing in the world. What else could I do but finish? The only other option I had was to quit. I couldn't turn around and go back! I knew I had to finish at that point.

As soon as I hit mile 26, I hit the water works. The tears weren't saying that I was a big wuss, they were saying that I was going to finish something that a lot of people would never think about doing, and those who do think about doing it often don't finish.

Finally, after a couple of outrageous rainstorms, some very gusty winds along the coast, and 26.2 miles, I had finished my first marathon. I didn't know what to do but raise my arms in triumph and cry my eyes away. I didn't know what to think about except for, "Why didn't I qualify? Why couldn't that clock say 3hrs 11min and not 3hr 40min 26sec?" I had conquered because I never quit. I didn't quit because pain is temporary, but quitting is forever.

*Winter Waltz*

Have you ever tried to catch a snowflake on your tongue?

It's not as easy as you think.

You must brave the harsh winter climate, so the weak must stay behind, and leave the comfort of a warm shelter for the brutal cold of a New England winter.

So much more than just tipping your head back and sticking out your tongue out: it is an art for those whose mind hangs on by a thread or those who don't know any better.

It's unacceptable to let any snowflake come to you, you must be the aggressor.

Tilting back your head and hunting for the perfect snowflake through squinting eyes.

Staring into the seemingly endless white until perfection calls your name.

A slow waltz as the wind blows, staying step for step with it.

Not worrying about obstacles that may clutter your path.

Equilibrium slowly fades from looking up too long.

As your dance partner approaches, stick out your tongue and watch the perfect balance of beauty and grace hit your tongue and disappear.

There will never be another one like it.

A special moment in time that lasts just seconds, but may stay with us forever.

Have you ever tried to catch a snowflake on your tongue?

*Cask*

Let me fall  
Through these skies of mind  
To the open arms of the welcoming below

Let me fall  
In this unknown  
Tangle of swinging stars  
A netted cradle of worlds

Let me fall  
Slip your warm hand from mine  
And trust  
That I can learn  
To fly.

*Dragon Fly*

Sunset, Sunrise  
Between the two we live and die  
Gathering the fire flies to see by  
As we salvage the shattered peaces  
Of a world long gone

Long gone but still here  
In memories  
Shadows of now  
For the once was

Cold and pale  
No longer bright  
Or filled with life

Joyful songs crumble to dust on my tongue  
What has happened  
To those happy memories?  
Tainted they are  
Leaving me with nothing  
But emptiness inside  
And broken glass in my hands  
As the fire flies  
Fly away.

*How You're Fed*

Down by the docks, your mother flocks to men.  
Her bright loose locks may gain an extra ten.  
It's late at night and you are sleeping.  
Sailors grasp until she's in their keeping.  
The men call "Lay your belly under mine."  
She weeps and falls to a touch: un-benign.  
She floats from ship to ship, her arms pinioned  
'til at last she's satisfied the minions  
(in their opinion). They have had a night  
so delicious and easy, without a fight,  
costing nothing more than thirty dollars.  
They row and return her to the harbor.  
With sacrifice done, she goes to bed.  
If only you knew this is how you're fed.

*Planetary Affairs*

As the Earth asked  
to court Jupiter  
she responded

with a wink  
and a whisper  
Only if

Pluto doesn't suspect  
our fling among the stars  
His orbit is far too great to see us overlap

I am the mother of this ellipse  
Cuddle in my atmosphere  
I won't feel guilty

*Love*

An open book with one chapter written  
Yet the opening words say it all  
"A thousand words cannot tell"  
I know it, you know it

A novel of change, compromise, failure, and success  
The characters are familiar  
A boy and a girl  
Or is it a knight and a princess?  
Either way the resolution is the same

But what means the most is the chapters in between  
The heart of the story  
When the knight rescues the girl  
Or is it a princess?  
It is both he decides.

The reader sees this unfold  
But to him it is blind  
For the knight fell in love  
And love is one of a kind

*The Moment of Truth in Stories*

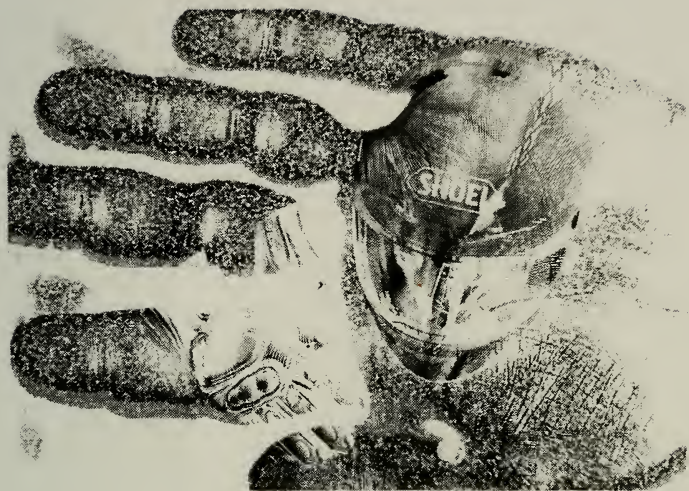
I have read that stories can save us  
Stories of fact or stories of fiction  
Frantic eyes scan the lines  
Sucked into another world  
A world that grabs our every thought  
No longer do we dwell on our sorrow  
Instead we remember why we indulged to start

I have heard that stories can save us  
Stories of fact or stories of fiction  
I have heard the stories of sorrow  
I have also witnessed the fight  
Emotions begin to pile up, and it is told  
That is when the writer begins to write

I have seen that stories can save us  
Mostly stories of fact and still some of fiction  
Words of the saviors  
Spoken or on paper  
Memories of a hero lost and forgotten  
I have seen poets and writers alike  
Write their stories so they sleep another night

*Reinventing Beauty*

Reevaluating the potential of a blank canvas  
The artist turns to an analyst  
Paces back and forth  
Turning statistic after statistic over in his mind  
Every detail is too insignificant  
Every blank leaves space for a scar  
All eyes are closed now  
Lead with your heart  
Just to really know  
Exactly who you are  
Step one... outline  
Step two... evaluate  
Art is not beautiful  
Until normal is destroyed  
Nothing is beautiful  
Until it's a tragedy  
So break down the boundaries  
Of the world you live in  
Just so you know  
The worth of the individual  
All that is around you  
Is what you don't understand  
Until you analyze  
Rolling country sides  
And busy city streets  
Captured in frames  
To soothe the soul  
To protect you from where you have never been  
And never will be  
Because art is beautiful  
And text only complicates things



**CHRIS AHO**

*Handdev*





I need to  
irritating feel  
my wrist  
something  
s, the most beautiful thin  
een. Though I am in part  
f the thick taint in the  
I can see it and recognize  
of small but just beginning to  
ing the work the first time, by  
ills that are practically tangible  
from the backstabbing, crude  
hocked, and violence of human nature. And  
I'm filled with hope.

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